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978-0-521-83875-7 - Jewish Forced Labor Under the Nazis: Economic Needs and Racial
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Segregated Labor Deployment – Central Planning and Local Practice, 1938–1945

PERSECUTORY POLICY IN 1938 AND INITIAL PLANS FOR FORCED LABOR

Historical researchers and the public still usually associate forced labor by German Jews in the Nazi period with work in concentration camps, or sometimes with assignment to industrial enterprises shortly before deportation. The fact that forced labor had already functioned as an integral component of anti-Jewish policy since 1938 was scarcely known until recently. In the concepts and plans for persecution of Jews developed after 1933 by leading Nazis, there was initially no reference to forced labor. The foremost objective was rapid and complete expulsion of Jewish Germans from Germany. However, with the Anschluss, 200,000 additional Jews came under German rule. At the same time, obstacles to mass emigration proliferated. The greater the number of persecutory measures introduced, the deeper the Jews sank into poverty. Without financial means, leaving remained illusory for most Jews. At the same time, willingness abroad to accept refugees diminished. It dawned on the Nazi leadership that their goal of expelling all Jews could no longer be attained with the methods used before.¹

Thus, ideas about forced labor first evolved primarily as a spontaneous means of exerting pressure to force departure, then later as a planned element of the changed persecutory policy. At the end of May 1938, for example, Hitler demanded that “asocial and criminal Jews” be arrested to “perform important excavation work throughout the Reich.”² Whether this was intended as a real work project or not is difficult to assess. Heydrich decided in any case to implement this directive, with the raid on “asocials” that he

¹ Chapter 1 is an extensively expanded and revised version of the author’s essay, “Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz und die Juden in Frankfurt am Main 1938–1942,” in *Nach der Kristallnacht. Jüdisches Leben und antijüdische Politik 1938–1945 in Frankfurt am Main*, edited by Monica Kingreen (Frankfurt am Main and New York, 1999), 259–288. Unless stated otherwise, the remarks are based on the study of the author entitled, *Der Geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz deutscher Juden. Zur Zwangsarbeit als Element der Verfolgung 1938 bis 1943* (Berlin, 1997).

² Yad Vashem Archive (YV), Jerusalem, 051/OSOBI (Center for the Preservation of the Historical Documentary Collection [Moscow]), No. 88, Fol. 33, June 8, 1938, note from the SD Jewish section on the June 1, 1938, session at the Reich Security Main Office.

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had just arranged, to put so-called shirkers, beggars, and so forth, in concentration camps to serve as laborers. Even a one-month prison sentence marked a Jew as an “asocial” or a “criminal”; it could, for example, be the penalty for a traffic offense. In the course of the so-called “Asozialen-Aktion” (Asocial Operation), considerably more than 2,500 “previously convicted” Jews were taken away in June 1938; at that level, the number of Jews affected was disproportionate. In contrast to the other people arrested, no proof of fitness to work was required of Jews.³

More repression did little to change the situation of the Jewish population; in this respect, the Nazi policy obstructed itself. The Nazis in charge therefore went in search of new ideas. In response to the growing contradiction between the declared goal of expulsion and the large number of Jews without income and dependent on public welfare – a number that was rapidly growing due to new repressive measures – discussions for the first time raised the possibility of including comprehensive forced-labor measures in future anti-Jewish policy. In light of acute labor shortages and growing welfare expenditures, the Nazi leadership simply had to bring itself to exploit, methodically and compulsorily, the labor potential of about 60,000 unemployed Jews⁴ in Germany, if not all able-bodied Jews.⁵ Models had been developed since the mid-thirties by the municipal welfare offices. Since that time, Berlin, Duisburg, Leipzig, and Hamburg had as a matter of principle sent all impoverished Jews supported by public welfare to work performing unpaid mandatory labor in separate columns at special work sites or even special camps. In contrast to Aryan welfare recipients, the Jews had to work off the support funds received from the state. Local labor offices also introduced such programs for recipients of unemployment insurance.⁶

The impetus for a Reich initiative came from annexed Austria. There the Viennese labor administration had started in September 1938 “to have Jews supported with public funds perform excavation work, quarry work, etc., until they [were] able to emigrate.”⁷ In accordance with this idea, which drew upon the compulsory labor model of the welfare administration, the Reich Institute for Labor Placement and Unemployment Insurance

³ The Jews, more than 2,500, made up at least one-quarter of the total of about 10,000 arrestees in the Reich; Gruner, *Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*, 41–45. For the June operation, see Wolfgang Ayaß, “Asoziale” im Nationalsozialismus (Stuttgart, 1995), 147–165.

⁴ Avraham Barkai, “Der wirtschaftliche Existenzkampf der Juden im Dritten Reich 1933–1938,” in *Die Juden im Nationalsozialistischen Deutschland. The Jews in Nazi Germany 1933–1943*, edited by Arnold Paucker (Tübingen, 1986), 156.

⁵ Gruner, *Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*, 40–54.

⁶ For details, see Gruner, *Öffentliche Wohlfahrt und Judenverfolgung. Wechselwirkungen lokaler und zentraler Politik im NS-Staat (1933–1942)* (Munich, 2002).

⁷ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv/Archiv der Republik (ÖStA/AdR) Vienna, Bürckel Materials, Carton 24, No. 1762/2, Fols. 40–41, Gärtner (Branch Office of the Reich Institute in Vienna) to the Reich Governor Bürckel, September 20, 1938. See Chapter 4.

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(*Reichsanstalt für Arbeitsvermittlung und Arbeitslosenversicherung*, or RAfAA) was already preparing in mid-October for general utilization of all Jewish unemployment relief recipients in Germany.⁸ At the same time, the SS had just begun to consider forced labor. In September, during the so-called Sudeten crisis, the SS Security Service made plans to intern all Jews in Germany in forced-labor camps in case of war.⁹ If the SS saw in forced labor a means of forestalling the potential security risk of tens of thousands of unemployed men, the labor administration was more interested in the labor potential. Both conceptions of forced labor were in any case based on the assumption that tens of thousands of Jewish men and women would remain for the short and middle terms in Germany.

After the Munich Agreement, the Nazi leadership resorted to force as the instrument for Jewish policy, with the intent of accelerating expulsion. First, 17,000 Jews with Polish citizenship were forcibly expelled at the end of October 1938; then, only two weeks later, an organized pogrom swept the Reich. The actual turning point in persecutory policy, however, was less the resort to violent action than the ensuing fundamental reorientation of Jewish persecution. Forced labor and ghettoization, until then discussed only in the event of war, were integrated into the new conception of “Jewish policy”—*Zwangsgemeinschaft* (the forced community). However, the Nazi leadership assigned the task of organizing a forced labor system not to the SS, but to the labor administration, to guarantee exploitation of unemployed Jewish workers socially dependent on the Nazi state in a manner advantageous to the labor market.¹⁰

YEAR OF INTRODUCTION, END OF 1938–SUMMER 1939

Segregated labor deployment was first introduced for all unemployed Jews registered at labor offices (*Arbeitsämter*) who received unemployment insurance benefits. While the Nazis understood “labor deployment” to mean quasi-military regulation of the labor market, the term “*Der Geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*,” that is, segregated labor deployment, was used for specific forms of forced labor developed by the labor administration. The December

⁸ Decree of the Reich Institute for Labor Placement and Unemployment Insurance, October 19, 1938; excerpt in Dieter Maier, “Arbeitsverwaltung und nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung in den Jahren 1933–1939,” in *Beiträge zur Nationalsozialistischen Gesundheits- und Sozialpolitik*, Vol. 8 (Berlin, 1989), 110. For the history of the Reich Institute, see Volker Hermann, *Vom Arbeitsmarkt zum Arbeitseinsatz. Zur Geschichte der Reichsanstalt für Arbeitsvermittlung und Arbeitslosenversicherung 1929 bis 1939* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993).

⁹ Gruner, *Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*, 47–48.

¹⁰ At the year change from 1938 to 1939, there were no unskilled laborers for expansion of the infrastructure because foreigners could rarely be employed due to the lack of foreign exchange; Gruner, *Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*, 62–66.

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20, 1938, decree of Friedrich Syrup, the President of the Reich Institute for Labor Placement and Unemployment Insurance, states: “The state has no interest in leaving the labor potential of unemployed Jews capable of working untapped and of possibly using public funds to support them without anything in return. The goal is to quickly put to work all unemployed able-bodied Jews. . . . They will be utilized in factories and divisions of factories, in construction and improvement, separated from loyal followers.”¹¹ This decree was not specific about practical organization or legal terms of employment. Nevertheless, the decree was to constitute the basis for German Jews’ forced labor over the course of almost three years, until October 1941.

The Reich labor administration¹² had sole responsibility for planning and executing this anti-Jewish measure and, consequently, enormous latitude for creative organization. In practice, Jews in the segregated labor deployment program across Germany were subject to a “separate law” from the outset: in the compulsory labor requirement based on racial criteria; in the principle of deployment in formations (*Kolonneneinsatz*) rather than as individuals; in the nature of the work, which neglected qualifications and professional knowledge; in exploitation as underpaid unskilled workers; and in segregation from non-Jews in the labor office and in the workplace.

To ensure effective organization of compulsory employment, most of Germany’s big cities created special offices in the labor administrations. But to implement the forced-labor program at all, labor offices needed extensive help from public institutions and private enterprises. However, they could not force city administrations, regional builders, or private firms to use Jews. From the beginning, regional labor offices attempted to find building sites suitable for planned use of Jewish columns in their area. Regional labor offices arranged transfers preferably to infrastructure construction projects that were important for the national economy (for instance, highway construction and canal, dike, and dam projects). In Hesse, for example, the

¹¹ Complete reproduction of this document (PS-1720 of the Nuremberg Trial materials) in Wolf Gruner, “Der Beginn der Zwangsarbeit für arbeitslose Juden in Deutschland 1938/39. Dokumente aus der Stadtverwaltung Berlin,” in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 37, 2 (1989): 139, Doc. No. 1. Syrup was born in 1881 in Lüchow, Lower Saxony. He was the president of the Reich Office for Labor Placement (*Reichsamt für Arbeitsvermittlung*) from 1920 to 1927 and president of the Reich Institute for Labor Placement and Unemployment Insurance from 1927 to 1938. After integration of that Institute in the Reich Labor Ministry, Syrup was appointed to the position of State Secretary (*Staatssekretär*). After the war, he died during his internment in the former Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp near Berlin in 1945.

¹² Until the end of 1938, this was the Reich Institute; after its integration into the Reich Ministry of Labor, the Ministry; and after February 1942, the General Commissioner for Labor Utilization. Labor offices existed at the local level before 1933. These institutions registered unemployed people, kept track of them, and provided state benefits for a limited period of time. Beginning in early 1939, local labor offices became Reich agencies under the Ministry of Labor.

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Gauleiter provided assistance. In the Hesse-Nassau Gau, including the city of Frankfurt am Main, 250 Jews could initially be recruited because they had registered as unemployed. On instructions of the NSDAP Gauleiter, 200 Jews were used for an improvement program in Homberg, and part of the remaining fifty for construction projects in Mainz.¹³ Many of the unemployed Jews were sent by labor offices to work sites at some distance from their homes. By the summer of 1939, more than thirty camps had been created under the direction of the Reich labor administration for segregated labor deployment of Jews in Old Reich territory (Germany within its 1937 borders) alone, outside and independent of the concentration camp system. The regional focal point of this labor camp system was Lower Saxony.¹⁴ Dike and road construction offices, companies for dam construction, and municipal administrations took responsibility for organizing the Jewish labor camps, and were also the beneficiaries.

City administrations used the cheap forced labor to build streets, collect garbage, and construct parks and sports fields. Whether and how Jews were utilized in municipalities depended to a great extent on the attitude and the involvement of the particular administration. The Kelkheim Bürgermeister who requested Jews from Frankfurt in spring 1939 and set up a labor camp at the local inn was not only interested in racial exploitation of the Frankfurt Jews; he also wanted his city to profit unduly from their labor. Bürgermeister Wilhelm Graf requested authorization from the Frankfurt am Main labor office to be allowed to inflict especially low wages on his “columns of Jews.” Furthermore, without even contacting the competent authorities, he simply shrugged off the workers’ right to days off and ordered, “The Jews must work on April 20 (the birthday of the Führer).”¹⁵ Comparable special regulations existed in many places, pushed through by public builders and by private companies. Such initiatives represented the informal onset of a separate labor law, as no relevant anti-Jewish decree had been issued centrally.¹⁶ In May 1939, about 10,000 to 15,000 predominantly male Jews were working in

¹³ Stadtarchiv (StadtA) Kelkheim im Taunus, Record Volume “Labor Utilization of a Column of Jews” (April–October, 1939), no folio numbers, Note of the Kelkheim Bürgermeister, March 6, 1939.

¹⁴ See Chapter 2. For general remarks on what follows, see also Gruner, *Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*, 217–218.

¹⁵ The Bürgermeister turned down the construction businessman Bechtoldt who was seeking Jewish workers from him because Bechtoldt was prepared to pay RM 0.82 per hour to Jews, which was almost 30 Pfennig more than the low rate sought by the Bürgermeister. Only one of the city council members, Josef Herr, later demanded, for example, that the Bürgermeister revalue the work, as most of the married Jews could not get by on the inadequate wages paid; StadtA Kelkheim im Taunus, Record Volume “Labor Utilization of a Column of Jews,” no folio numbers, File note on an order of the Kelkheim Bürgermeister, April 17, 1939; *ibid.*, Note, March 31, 1939; *ibid.*, Note of the Bürgermeister, May 20, 1939; *ibid.*, Letter, June 15, 1939.

¹⁶ See Gruner, *Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*.

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the segregated labor deployment program. A second Reich Labor Ministry decree on May 19 was designed to remove the remaining ideological barriers, economic problems, and organizational obstacles.¹⁷

The Nazi census for May recorded 14,461 Jews in Frankfurt am Main, 2.61 percent of the city's residents.¹⁸ As the example of Kelkheim illustrates, the fact that Frankfurt had the second largest number of Jewish inhabitants in Germany clearly influenced planning for local use of forced labor. The local labor office was able to send a number of Jewish laborers to construction projects outside the city. At that point, the forced laborers represented a labor reserve that was doubly interesting, as problems with currency transfer hindered the mass employment of foreigners that was actually intended. Without the utilization of seventy Jews from Frankfurt am Main, arranged in July 1939 by the Hessian state labor office, the Reich Autobahn construction management office in Kassel could no longer have guaranteed procurement of materials to complete Reich grain storage construction projects and high priority stretches of roadway by the beginning of the war.¹⁹

As a result of interregional labor transfers, the Reich labor administration succeeded through the summer months in increasing the labor force Reich-wide to about 20,000 Jewish forced laborers, almost all of them men.²⁰ In view of this considerable number, the Reich Interior Ministry pressured the Reich Ministry of Labor in summer 1939 to commit to defining the labor status of the Jews. The Reich Interior Ministry favored a definition that held that Jews in segregated labor deployment were not in a formal employment category (*Arbeitsverhältnis*), but instead were in a "de facto employment category."²¹ Two years later, in 1941-42, this concept was to be the keystone of the forced labor orders for German Jews, Poles, and Eastern workers employed in the Reich.

DEPORTATION OR FORCED LABOR?

FALL 1939-WINTER 1939-40

The beginning of the war was a radical turning point for the development of anti-Jewish policy. The war signaled the ultimate failure of the Nazi leadership's previous persecutory policy, despite all course corrections. After the borders and transit routes had been closed, mass emigration was

¹⁷ Gruner, *Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*, 92-107.

¹⁸ YV, Jerusalem, M1DN, No. 76, Fol. 30 and verso, Protocol of an April 11, 1940, meeting with the Frankfurt Oberbürgermeister recorded by the city treasurer.

¹⁹ The workers were to be available on July 17; Bundesarchiv (BA) Berlin, 46.01 General Inspector for German Roadways (GIS), No. 1205, Fol. 62 and verso, Note of the General Inspector for German Roadways, July 8, 1939, and handwritten note, July 13, 1939.

²⁰ Gruner, *Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*, 92-107.

²¹ BA Berlin, 31.01 Reich Minister of Economics (RWM), No. 10310, Fol. 75 and verso, Reich Interior Ministry to the Reich Ministry of Labor, among others, July 23, 1939.

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unworkable, even under compulsion. The September 1939 attack on Poland prompted the Nazi leadership to consider what should be done with the mass of impoverished Jews in war time. Plans at the beginning of the year had included “war service of the Jews”; about 200,000 workers from the Old Reich and annexed territories had been anticipated but no concrete preparations were proposed. In the second week after the war began, confusion still reigned. In view of Poland’s rapid fall, the Nazi leadership made the radical decision in the third week of September to “resettle” the German Jews there in the near future. As a consequence, the plan to introduce forced labor for all Jews in Germany, which Hitler himself wanted to authorize, did not take effect right away.²²

Instead, on the Nazi leadership’s orders the labor administration was to continue the segregated labor deployment program following the organizational model in use up to that point, until resettlement of the Jews was feasible. As a result of the war-time reform of labor law, the availability of Jewish forced labor increased tremendously. All Jews capable of working but previously supported by public welfare were now entitled to receive unemployment insurance, but at the same time were obligated to register with the labor offices. Many men, and a growing number of women, were thus brought under the control of the labor offices. While the labor offices now had a growing number of Jews at their disposal, the number of work slots in the columns decreased due to many building projects being halted because they were not critical to the war. In addition, the Nazi leadership’s persecutory policy was unpredictable for the long term, with the result that the labor offices at this time made only short-term commitments. Hence, they arranged for the allocation of hundreds of Jews to farms to help with the fall harvest, and in the winter primarily to cities for snow removal.²³

THE YEAR OF EXPANSION, SPRING 1940–SUMMER 1941

When deportations from Germany to the General Government were halted in spring 1940 after the first transports from Pomerania, the Reich labor administration took advantage of the lack of political activity to expand segregated labor deployment. New mobilizations of the *Wehrmacht* (armed forces) and increased armaments production in preparation for the occupation of France had resulted in significant labor shortages in the German market.

²² Gruner, *Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*, 107–116. Regarding the early decision about the deportation of all German Jews, see Wolf Gruner, “Von der Kollektivausweisung zur Deportation der Juden aus Deutschland. Neue Perspektiven und Dokumente (1938–1945),” in *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus*, Bd. 20: *Deportationen der Juden aus Deutschland. Pläne, Praxis, Reaktionen 1938 – 1945* (Göttingen, 2004), 21–62.

²³ Gruner, *Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*, 116–117.



Map 1. The Greater German Reich and the General Government (1940)

Approximately 11,500 Jewish citizens still lived in Frankfurt am Main at that time. By the end of April 1940, the pool of able-bodied welfare recipients was depleted. With the changes in labor legislation after the war began, the number of individuals eligible for recruitment had increased to over 2,000 registered with the department established for compulsory labor at the Jewish welfare office in Frankfurt am Main. However, besides more than 100 women (most of whom usually took care of relatives), 840 of 1,961 available male Jews were already over fifty years old. One thousand fifteen were regarded as only capable of working part-time. Nine hundred and forty-six men (more than half in the seventeen-to-fifty age group and a third in the fifty-to-sixty age group) were already employed. Of these, 546 performed forced labor (331 in brick or excavation work; 215 carrying coal or similar jobs); and 400 worked in Jewish organizations. As most of the women attended to relatives in need of care, only 142 Jewish women were registered as suitable for labor. Thirty-nine women worked for the forest management section of the municipal construction office attending to planting in the city

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forest.²⁴ As no more people fit to work and supported by public funds or by Jewish offices were available, the local “Gestapo representative in the Jewish welfare office,” who was arrogating control of forced labor,²⁵ pressed for a change in the obligation requirements that were in effect up to that point: He negotiated with the Frankfurt labor office about forced labor “by individuals capable of forced labor but not receiving support.”²⁶ The representative in Frankfurt, however, was the exception. As a rule, the labor offices in German cities and regions arranged for forced labor on their own responsibility, without the intervention of other authorities.

The Frankfurt initiative coincided with the decision of the Reich labor administration above the regional level to include almost all Jews in the forced-labor program, even those not supported with public funds. The decision was made with an eye to the labor required to prepare for the French campaign. The call issued to *all* Jewish men under fifty-five years old and *all* Jewish women under fifty years old to report for segregated labor deployment marked the transition from a labor requirement for selected groups to general forced labor for German Jews. No change in law effected this transition; no special order was issued. The sole basis was the old December 20, 1938, decree.²⁷

Beyond this expansion of compulsory service, a further change was evident: Jewish men, and with increasing frequency Jewish women, were for the first time working in large numbers as unskilled laborers in the industrial sector rather than performing support work in construction or the transportation sector, as before. The demands of the armaments industry for another half-million workers was only a secondary factor in this change. At first, the goal of employment of Jews in industry was to release unskilled people of “German blood” for mobilization, vocational training, and reorientation activities. Jewish women were especially sought after on the one hand because of the small percentage of Aryan women in the work force, and on the other because of the specific demands of technology, for example the precision engineering branch of industry. For that reason, women were soon singled out for employment in more skilled jobs than previously.²⁸

Mass utilization, which in the meantime affected tens of thousands, and the ever-growing commitment of Jews as unskilled workers in German industry, called for a formal definition of Jews’ labor status. The Reich Interior Ministry, the SS, and the Office of the Führer’s Deputy required that Jews only

²⁴ *Dokumente zur Geschichte der Frankfurter Juden*, published by the Commission for Research on the History of the Frankfurt Jews (Frankfurt am Main, 1963), XIII 1, 456–457, Report of the Gestapo representative to the Oberbürgermeister of Frankfurt, May 3, 1940.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, VI 50, 336, Gestapo draft, May 31, 1940.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, XIII 1, 456–457, Report of the Gestapo representative to the Frankfurt Oberbürgermeister, May 3, 1940.

²⁷ Gruner, *Der geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz*, 133–151.

²⁸ *Ibid.*