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The everyday experience of forced labor among ‘Eastern workers’ in the agriculture of National Socialist Germany

Abstract. The article examines the situation where the Soviet citizens were taken away by force during World War II and whose labour was used in the agriculture of National Socialist Germany. In the context of legalized discrimination, under the strict system of control and punishment, as well as due to the inevitable close contact with the German peasants, the ‘Eastern workers’ developed different survival strategies that varied between adaptation and resistance.

Keywords: World War II, the Soviet Union, Germany, national socialism, forced labour, ‘Eastern workers’ (Ostarbeiter), agriculture

Introduction

The forced labour of ‘Eastern workers’ – or ‘Ostarbeiter’¹ – in the economy of the Third Reich is one of the darkest pages in the history of World War II. With the failure of the German Blitzkrieg at the end of 1941, extreme labour shortage led to the shift from the policy of extermination of the USSR human resources to the policy of their employment on the territory of Germany. The working and living conditions for the ‘Eastern workers’ reflected the concept of the Nazi legislation based on the Nazi doctrine of ‘racial’ superiority that was also strictly regulating all aspects of foreigners’ life and their staying in the Reich. This also referred to those industries where the traditions of arrangement of the processes to use seasonal labour processes conflicted with the treatment of the workers, such as it was in the agriculture of the Nazi Germany.

¹ Ostarbeiters – a Nazi German designation for ‘Eastern workers’ apprehended from the occupied Central and Eastern Europe to perform forced labor in Germany during World War II.

Main text

Amid existence of significant amount of scientific literature on the history of World War II and fascism², the problem of forced labour of the Soviet citizens in the Nazi Germany and on the occupied territories received only fragmentary coverage in the national historiography. The study by P.M. Polian stand out as a unique attempt to make synthesizing research into the problem on forced labour of the Soviet prisoners of war and ‘Eastern workers’ as an independent historical phenomenon. In the extensive foreign historiography, the works of J. Lehmann³, A. Zühl (Frank)⁴ and G. Freitag⁵ were devoted to various aspects of forced labour in agriculture but did not use the everyday experience of ‘Eastern workers’ as the subject of their research.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the everyday experience of forced labour among the ‘Eastern workers’ in the agriculture of National Socialist Germany. The method of ‘oral history’ used in this work allows to present the point of view of the victims and to study the phenomenon of forced labour more deeply.

The pragmatic position of peasants in relation to labour prevented the practical implementation of the Nazi regulations regarding treatment of the workers arriving from the Soviet Union⁶. Due to remoteness of repressive apparatus and a peculiar position of the peasants, the ‘Eastern workers’ had little opportunity to improve their own situation by building relationships with the German peasants. The behaviour of ‘Eastern workers’ at peasant farms depended on many factors and often varied between adaption to the circumstances and resistance to them. As an example, Ustina S.⁷, who worked at the estate near the town of Sulz, described numerous cases of individual resistance of the ‘Eastern workers’. During her deportation, she tried to

² See, for example, Bessonov B.I. *Fashizm: ideologiya, politika* [Fascism: Ideology, Politics]. Moscow, 1985; Blank A.S. *Iz istorii rannego fashizma v Germanii. Organizatsiya. Ideologiya. Metody* [From the History of Early Fascism in Germany. Organization. Ideology. Methods]. Moscow, 1978; Rozanov G.L. *Konets «tret'ego reikha»* [The End of the ‘Third Reich’]. Moscow, 1990. For more information about the national historiography of German fascism, see: Galaktionova Yu.V. *Germanskij fashizm kak fenomen pervoy poloviny XX veka: otechestvennaya istoriograpgiya 1945–90s godov* [German Fascism as a Phenomenon of the First Half of the 20th Century: The National Historiography of 1945–1990s]. Kemerovo, 1999.

³ Lehmann J. *Zwangsarbeiter in der deutschen Landwirtschaft 1939 bis 1945. Europa und der Reichseinsatz: ausländische Zivilarbeiter, Kriegsgefangene und KZ-Häftlinge in Deutschland 1938–1945*; Hrsg. U. Herbert. Essen, 1991, s. 127–139.

⁴ Zühl A. Zum Verhältnis der deutschen Landbevölkerung gegenüber Zwangsarbeitern und Kriegsgefangenen. *Faschismus und Rassismus*; Hrsg. W. Röhr. Berlin, 1992, s. 342–352.

⁵ Freitag G. *Zwangsarbeiter im Lipper Land: Der Einsatz von Arbeitskräften aus Osteuropa in der Landwirtschaft Lippes, 1939–1945*. Bochum, 1996.

⁶ Lehmann J. *Zwangsarbeiter in der deutschen Landwirtschaft 1939 bis 1945. Europa und der Reichseinsatz: ausländische Zivilarbeiter, Kriegsgefangene und KZ-Häftlinge in Deutschland 1938–1945*; Hrsg. U. Herbert. Essen, 1991, s. 135.

⁷ Interview mit Ustina S. *IGB/ISFLDP*. Interview mit Ustina. S. 37.

escape twice and told about her disobedience and obstinate behaviour in the German household. In a quarrel with the estate manager, Ustina S., in a rage, threw a fork at him, “And I think, “I do not care!” I was not afraid of death. I was not afraid, you see? I was simply not afraid. I thought, to suffer that much... Being hungry, cold and nevertheless working and sweating like that, and he would still beat me ... scoff me⁸?“

The passive resistance common for the ‘Eastern workers’ was much safer than open protests and manifested itself in the slow or careless performance of the assigned work. The passive resistance was also risky, since the German peasants had a few opportunities for compulsory increase of labour productivity of the ‘Eastern workers’ in their own economy. As an example, the manager of the estate where Ustina S. worked once frightened the ‘Eastern workers’ by shooting, getting the gun and putting all the workers against the wall⁹. Sometimes former forced labor workers in their memoirs pointed out another form of protests of the ‘Eastern workers’ under the conditions of working in the agriculture, and namely, changing or complete leveling the power relations in the dichotomy ‘forced labor worker – master’. This is typical for the memories of those workers who, based on their knowledge and experience, saw themselves equal or superior to their masters¹⁰.

The example of the interview with Ustina S. shows that the ‘Eastern workers’ found their main support for resistance among the groups of forced labour workers. In the estates, where the owners fully complied with the Nazi regulations regarding columns and camp maintenance, the ‘Eastern workers’ experienced the same regarding their working and living conditions in many respects as it would be in the industrial sector. There, it was much easier to comply with the ban of the so-called ‘shared tables’. The tables in such estates stood separately not only for the owners and for the foreign workers, but also separately for each group of foreign workers¹¹. The owners of the estates could assign additional workers to themselves, therefore the value of an individual worker for the economic viability of any estate was very small.

It should be noted that the ‘Eastern workers’ who were used as a group had relatively little access to or any relations with the German population. Intercultural communication, exchange of experience, assimilation of values and perception of the image of the German peasants were rather insignificant there.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Grinchenko G. Erste Auswertung eines Oral-History-Projektes aus der Ostukraine. *Hitlers Sklaven. Lebensgeschichtliche Analysen zur Zwangsarbeit im internationalen Vergleich*; Hrsg. Platto A.v. u.a. Wien: Böhlau, 2008, s. 237.

¹¹ Winter J. Lorberg, der Gendarm und der Polen-Franz. Nazi-Jahre auf dem Hofgut Wickstadt – Szenen aus der Zwangsarbeit. *Fern der Heimat unter Zwang - Der Einsatz ‘fremdländischer Arbeitskräfte’ während des Zweiten Weltkrieges in der Wetterau*; Hrsg. K.D. Rack, M. Kingreen, D. Richhardt. Butzbach, 2004, s. 442.

The ‘Eastern workers’ that were exploited individually, describe their relationship with the German population differently, more often indicating the possibilities of adaptation. An interview with Vera W., who fled from her factory during a bombardment and found refuge amid the agricultural estate in a small peasant farm near Stolberg, would be a typical example for considering the experience of adaptation for the ‘Eastern workers’. Having changed her place of work by means of escape, Vera W. got into substantially better working and living conditions. In general, Vera W. positively evaluated her living conditions and the attitude of the German family to her. Having experience in the industry, she immediately understood the main difference of her new position, “Well, they did not beat me. I do not want to say that; they did not beat me. The mistress told me to write a letter to find out if there was still anyone at home. “If there was no one alive there, so be it, but if there was anyone alive, I will give you away in marriage”, she said. She was possibly joking with me, or something like that, but I cried. So, she told me, “Do not cry. You are good for us. We do not offend you. Look at how difficult it is for the others. And you eat well. This is war. The war will be over, and you will go home¹². ”

Vera W. perfectly understood that staying on the farm became her chance to survive and to spend the last months of the war in a quiet and relatively safe place. However, despite the humane treatment by the German family, the initial experience of being in industry did not allow her to establish truly trusting relationship with the farm owners. By the time of the escape, she had a clear idea of ‘her racial inferiority’ and the cruelty with which the German employers could treat her compatriots, “They live well. Not worth talking about it. They see themselves as they are above us all, their nation is above all. [...] We are the third-class people. They consider themselves so worthwhile”¹³.

The idea that the workforce had to be reliable and efficient was a norm for Vera V. in relations with the Germans. Having already experienced the much crueler treatment in the industry, she could not even think of refusing to work in any form on a peasant farm. The need for obedience seemed legitimate to her also during the interview¹⁴. Based on this understanding, she did not criticize the restrictions on free movement and free choice to which she was subjected. Semjen V, a former forced labour worker, said in his letter, “We were helpless, and we had nobody to complain to. I did not resist; I did what I was ordered¹⁵. ”

¹² Interview mit Vera W. *IGB/ISFLDP*. Interview mit Vera W., s. 66.

¹³ Ibid, s. 67.

¹⁴ Several of the Soviet citizens, who survived the hunger and persecution in the Soviet Union, do not consider the period of their stay and work in the agriculture of Germany the worst part of their life. See: Interview mit Vera W. *IGB/ISFLDP*. Interview mit Vera W.; Interview mit Semen W.// *IGB/ISFLDP*. Interview mit Semen W.

¹⁵ Brief von Hr. Semjen V., 25. August 2000. *Stadtarchiv Meinerzhagen*.

Adaptation became one of the most widespread strategies for survival amongst ‘Eastern workers’ in the agriculture of National Socialist Germany and meant adaptation to the conditions of the microsocium of an individual peasant household. It seemed that the National Socialist Party took all measures to avoid the integration of ‘Eastern workers’ into the environment of the German peasantry. Any contacts with the Russian workers, not relating to the labour process, especially any conversations on political topics, were strictly prohibited¹⁶. The ‘Eastern workers’ were not allowed to eat with the German people, to stay in the village at the end of the working day or take part in the church services¹⁷. However, the integration of ‘Eastern workers’ was natural and irreversible, especially in small agricultural households.

Another way of adaptation of ‘Eastern workers’ was to demonstrate a religious community with the German peasants. German researcher A. Zühl explains some cases of humane attitude of the peasant population in the Nazi Germany towards foreign workers by a strong role of the church and religion and the associated Christian ethics in the rural areas¹⁸. The Security Service of the SS, or the SD (German: Sicherheitsdienst), stressed in its reports of July 1943 that certain groups of workers from the Soviet Union had a pronounced sense of religiosity, among them the Ukrainians taken from rural areas, elderly people and a large majority of women¹⁹. The SD members saw this as a peculiar threat to the rural population, “The fact that the big part of the Russians turned out to be Catholics threatens to mix German and foreign blood. Thus, the Catholics of Regensburg thought that the Russians should be unusually devout people, because they constantly wear a crucifix around their necks”²⁰. Having discovered the religiosity among many ‘Eastern workers’ and even Catholicism among the Ukrainians, the German peasant population sometimes admitted ‘Eastern workers’ into their community. In the Münster region in May 1943, the local police station noted with concern that many ‘Eastern workers’ with a sign ‘Ost’ attended Sunday services in a church²¹. The local gendarmerie was mainly dissatisfied with the behavior of the population that was quite comfortable with the presence of foreigners in the church. As A. Zühl points out, this kind of attitude towards the workforce from Eastern Europe was one of the hidden forms of rejection by the pea-

¹⁶ Merkblatt zum Einsatz der Zivilarbeiter und –Arbeiterinnen aus dem sowjetischen Gebiet in der Landwirtschaft, 21. Juli 1942. STAMS. *Politische Polizei*. Nr. 366.

¹⁷ Zühl A. Zum Verhältnis der deutschen Landbevölkerung gegenüber Zwangsarbeitern und Kriegsgefangenen. *Faschismus und Rassismus*; Hrsg. W. Röhr. Berlin, 1992, s. 344.

¹⁸ Ibid, s. 349.

¹⁹ *Meldungen aus dem Reich*. Band 14. [31. Mai 1943 – 7. Juni 1943], s. 5485.

²⁰ Aus Bericht des SD-Abschnitts Bayereuth (Gau Bayerische Ostmark), 20. Juli 1942. *Bayern in der NS-Zeit: soziale Lage und politisches Verhalten der Bevölkerung im Spiegel vertraulicher Berichte*; Hrsg. M. Broszat. München, Wien, 1997, s. 62.

²¹ Schreiben an den Kreisleiter von Gestapo-Rauxel, 17. Mai 1943. STAMS. *NSDAP - Kreis- und Ortsgruppenleitungen*.

sant population of the restrictive religious policy of the Nazi Germany. The confession of the foreigners was far more important than their ethnic identity or race, especially for the Catholic population of Germany²². Under the conditions of forced labor, many ‘Eastern workers’ emphasized their belonging to a religion, using this fact not only to improve their situation but also simply to find moral support under the conditions of forced stay on the territory of Germany. As an example, the former forced labour worker Nona T. recalled how she taught another female worker to cross herself in the same way as the Germans did, “We had a Roman and an Eastern-Rite church, so I knew how to cross myself, both Polish and Russian-Orthodox style. So, I crossed myself, and she was a girl from Smolensk. There, in Smolensk, they did not have it the way we did in the West. So, the German woman who took workers to the church said, “Oh, you are good, you are good, you know how to cross yourself.” And she, this Polina, she did not know, “I do not know.” [...] “Teach me,” she asked me later. I answered, “Well, look at me.” So, when we came next time, “Let’s go to the (catholic) church,” she said. “Let’s go.” Well, we went into the church and she (that German woman) said, “Oh, this is good. Because this is not so good to stand alone, do it like other people do”²³.

During their stay in Germany, almost all ‘Eastern workers’ got an idea of better working and living conditions of foreign workers of other nationalities. Therefore, the natural tendency of many ‘Eastern workers’ would be an attempt to hide their national identity. Thus, the former forced labour worker Nona T. hid the fact of her Belarusian origin during her stay in a German village, because she was afraid to be suspected of sympathy for the partisan movement²⁴. Many ‘Eastern workers’, having learned about better working conditions for the Ukrainians deported from the Galicia district, tried to prove their Ukrainian origin by requesting supporting documents from Ukraine or the Ukrainian Central Committee²⁵.

Conclusion

Despite all positive experiences of working in the German agriculture as mentioned above, the memories of former forced labour workers in Germany have a clear trail of mental trauma inflicted in the war years, during either deportation or work. In

²² Zühl A. Op. cit, p. 350; G. Freitag points out in his research on the forced labour of foreign workers on the territory of Lipper Land that the human attitude to the foreigners of a different confession was also observed among the protestant part of the peasantry. See: Freitag G. *Zwangsarbeiter im Lipper Land ...* S. 36.

²³ Interview mit Nona T. *IGB/ISFLDP. Interview mit Nona T.*, s. 22.

²⁴ Ibid, s. 12.

²⁵ The Ukrainian Central Committee [Український центральний комітет; Ukrainskyi tsentralnyi komitet, or UTsK] was established in Cracow in 1945. The main task of the committee was to protect the rights of the Ukrainians in Galicia and to help conscript them for forced labour in Germany.

each interview with the former forced labor workers, they admitted to a various extent belonging to a group of workers, which the national socialists viewed as allegedly ‘racially inferior’ with a limited right to life.

The consistent implementation of the postulates of the ‘racial’ national-socialist ideology encountered the insuperable barriers in the agriculture of the Nazi Germany due to the peculiarity of the process of production in the agricultural sector and the high dependence of the German peasants on their workers due to a shortage of local labour resources. Despite the isolation policy carried out by the national socialists towards the labor force, ‘Eastern workers’ inevitably became part of microsocium at the peasants’ farms. In a situation of close contact with the German peasants, ‘Eastern workers’ tried to influence their own situation, developing survival strategies that varied between adaptation to the circumstances and resistance to them.

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