

Exhibition at the German-Russian Museum in Berlin: “Postscript—‘Eastern Workers’ in the German Reich”

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25 March 2022

In light of the current war hysteria it is worth paying a visit to the garden of the German-Russian Museum in Berlin-Karlshorst. Anyone seeking to counter the massive campaign for German military intervention in Ukraine is advised to study the consequences of the last military intervention in this region 80 years ago at the site where Nazi Germany issued its unconditional surrender ending World War II.

Together with the mobile exhibition “Dimensions of a Crime. Soviet Prisoners of War in World War II,” which documents the murder of millions of Soviet prisoners of war by the German Wehrmacht, SS and SA during the Second World War, panels of the exhibition “Postscript—‘Eastern Workers’ in the German Reich” are on display. The exhibition was assembled by the Moscow human rights organisation Memorial International, which the Putin regime disbanded at the end of last year.

This photographic documentation, created in 2017-18 as an educational project in Moscow, was already shown by the German-Russian Museum in the summer of 2020. It is now being displayed once again to protest against Memorial’s dissolution.

It commemorates the Soviet women, men and children who had to perform forced labour for the Nazi regime during World War II. Some 26 million people from all over Europe were forced to labour for Nazi Germany, including about 9 million from the Soviet Union.

According to estimates, 6.4 million people carried out forced labour in the occupied Soviet territories and another 2.8 million were deported to the German Reich. These so-called “Eastern workers,” including many from Ukraine, formed the largest group among the 13 million forced labourers in the German Reich. Marked with the badge “OST,” they were subjected to horrendous working and living conditions.

After the Second World War, these victims received no recognition from either Germany or the Soviet Union for the injustice they had suffered. Only in 2000 did the German Bundestag pass a resolution to establish the foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future,” aimed at providing compensation for the victims of the Nazi forced

labour program. By 2007, almost 1.7 million survivors received a one-time, mainly symbolic, payment of between €500 and €7,700. Half of the recipients came from the former Soviet Union.

“I am ashamed, I am ashamed, I am ashamed—to be German,” wrote one visitor in the exhibition guest book. Indeed, the panels in the museum garden are harrowing, and shocking even to those familiar with the monstrous crimes committed by the Hitler regime in the course of Germany’s war against the Soviet Union.

In fact, the pictures and personal memories of the victims came to light largely by chance. In 1990, the Russian newspaper *Izvestia* reported, with misleading wording, that Memorial, founded a year earlier to reappraise the crimes conducted during the Stalinist era, was also looking into the issue of compensation payments for unpaid work carried out in Germany during the Second World War.

In response, 320,000 letters were received, within two months from victims of forced labour, describing their experiences in detail with the aid of documents and photos. In the summer of 2017, a group of pupils and students in Moscow set about collecting and digitising these documents. The collection is accessible online (fond21.memo.ru).

The first war crimes trial in Nuremberg in 1945 coined the word “slave labour” for the forced labour carried out in the service of the Nazis. The applicability of this term in connection with those from the occupied eastern territories is painfully confirmed by the testimonies of affected women, young people and children on exhibit.

A few months after the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the Nazis began to implement their “General Plan East” in the occupied territories of the western Soviet Union, especially in Ukraine, Belarus and the western parts of Russia. The plan envisaged the “emptying” of the conquered territories and their “Germanic repopulation.”

While food rations were reduced to starvation levels, so-called labour offices organised the deportation of old people, women, youths, children from villages for labour deployment in the German Reich and Poland. On occasion, people were

arrested on the open street or at festivals and church services in order to fulfil predetermined quotas. Sometimes entire villages were deported. The policy was based on the decree issued by the Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, Alfred Rosenberg, in December 1941.

Vera, who was deported from the area of Pskov, Russia, at the age of 19, writes: “A German pulls me by one hand to the wagon, and by the other hand Mama pulls me back with both hands. Mama was crying, begging them to let me go, but the Nazi hit her right in the face and she fell down. I looked around. Her face was covered in blood as she called out ‘little daughter.’”

Under a photo of the Kiev railway station, a text reads: “The train was escorted by armed soldiers, and the tightly locked doors were not opened on the journey to Berlin. Somewhere near the city the doors were torn open and we were pushed out. A third of the people in the wagon had collapsed due to the stench and hunger (there was a toilet in the calf pen).”

Conditions resembled the deportation trains carrying Jews in the other direction, to the death camps in the East, beginning in 1942.

On arrival in Germany, workers were “disinfected” and medically examined in a transit camp. Their physical strength and state of health were checked as if they were at a slave or cattle market, with appropriate documents issued for sale to Germans.

“They herded us into a room and ordered us to strip naked, they smeared our heads [with a special ointment]—the Germans were afraid of lice,” writes Ganna, abducted at 21. She ended up in a factory in Nieheim.

“After that you could see how farmers in Germany came and started buying us. They looked at our teeth and muscles and poked us with sticks,” Olga writes. “They didn’t choose me and my sister—the Germans hung boards around our necks and sent us to the various factories.” (Picture on board below, 3rd from left).

“I was sold for 15 marks to a landowner in the village of Pogorsch,” reads the letter from Klavdiya, who was deported at 16 and put to work on a farm in Gdynia, Poland. “The mistress bought me for 30 marks,” explains Vladimir, who was allocated to a farm in Weiden in Oberpfalz when he was 17. Jefrossiniya, who was abducted at 20 and eventually put to work in a glass factory in Gehren, Arnstadt, writes: “We were priced cheap: 5 marks a head.”

In the factories, often armaments factories or mines, the “Eastern workers” had to conduct hard labour for up to 12 hours, no matter how young they were. They were housed in cramped barracks, given starvation rations and received no medical care.

Vitali, who was deported at the age of 18, reports on his work in a factory near Leipzig: “We wore rubber gloves. They were issued for 7 days, but tore earlier and there was no way we could get new ones. The acid solution reached the skin through

the holes that were worn through. Deep ulcers formed on our skin which did not heal afterwards.”

On the farms and in the urban households of the upper class and Nazi elite, there was sometimes a little more food and better living conditions, but those affected were absolutely dependent on the whims of their “masters.”

“Once this strange woman who had read Tolstoy slapped me in the face with her hand because of an absolute trifle. In her opinion, I had peeled the potatoes too thickly. That’s when I understood that I was nothing to her, merely a Russian swine,” reported Galina, who was abducted at 14 and had to work as a maid in Frankfurt.

And Irina, who was sold as a maid to a household in Freising when she was 19, writes: “The landlady called out from the dormitory: ‘Don’t forget, it’s only eleven kilometres to Dachau.’”

Pregnancy and childbirth were taboo for young female slaves from the East. Zinaida, who was deported when she was 21 and put to work with her husband on a farm near Nuremberg, gave birth to their son Oleg in 1944 and had to leave him unattended on the farm or in the cowshed while they worked. “Once, when he was two months old, the piglets almost bit him to death.” Other newborns were cruelly murdered.

It is to the credit of the museum in Berlin-Karlshorst that it is making such archival material accessible during the current climate of hostility against Russia.

The museum association is supported by Germany, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. However, since the 2014 coup in Kiev and the annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian representatives have boycotted its conferences, and the Ukrainian ambassador to Germany, Andriy Melnyk, an admirer of Ukrainian Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera, also boycotted last year’s commemoration of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

Melnyk’s stance is supported by the Green Party. Former member of parliament Marieluise Beck (Green Party), who actively promoted the coup in Kiev together with her husband, former chairman of the Heinrich Böll Foundation and former Maoist Ralf Fücks, protested against the presence of Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the commemoration ceremony and demanded the museum be renamed. So far, the museum management has resisted such attacks.

“Postscript—‘Eastern Workers’ in the German Reich” is on view until further notice. “Dimensions of a Crime. Soviet Prisoners of War in World War II,” as noted, has been extended until June 26. Both exhibitions at the German-Russian Museum have now acquired even greater relevance.



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