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## CHAPTER TWELVE

# **“We were treated like slaves.”**

## **Remembering forced labor for Nazi Germany**

CORD PAGENSTECHER

### **Introduction**

Can Nazi forced labor be considered slavery? What did it have in common with other systems of coerced labor that have appeared throughout history? What aspects are specific to it? I do not endeavor to draw a systematic comparison between these different and complex historical phenomena. A theoretically sound comparison would be difficult in any case because slavery and Nazi forced labor have not been analyzed in the same conceptual frameworks by historians. Very few works on the history of Nazi Germany have been influenced by postcolonial studies (Buggeln, Conrad, Füllberg-Stolberg, Patel), for example. German historians sometimes use the term “slave” without, however, really relating it to the history of slavery in the United States, let alone in other parts of the world. Recently, however, comparative studies that examine various forms of slavery, serfdom, and bonded labor in history have begun to appear, including Lutz Raphael’s work at University of Trier (see Raphael, “Krieg” and “Slavery”).

Germany’s own colonial past is largely forgotten today, although some discriminatory, racist, and genocidal ideas and practices in National Socialism seem to date back to German colonial history, be it Wilhelminian maritime colonialism or the continental, anti-Slavic colonialism during the First World War. German mainstream historiography still focuses on national rather than global perspectives, on political rather than cultural issues, on German-language literature rather than an international one.

Because of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, it is indeed problematic for Germans to take Nazi crimes as an object of comparative, not to mention cultural studies. While such an approach might help in understanding the wider context of unfree labor, it must not trivialize fascist violence or relativize German responsibility. This is rightly stressed in Marc Buggeln’s convincing comparison – not equation, as he underlines – between slavery in the American South and forced labor in the concentration camps. His article, however, is restricted to the post-



1942 subcamps of concentration camps, an important, but numerically small part of Nazi forced labor.

Instead of a comparison, this paper thus will provide a short and very general historical overview of Nazi forced labor and its post-war remembrance. More specifically, it scrutinizes the use of the term “slave” within the memorial discourse about Nazi forced labor. With slavery being part of European history, its legacy is also likely to be found in ideas of, about, and after National Socialism. That is, I am asking if and how verdicts of postwar trials, debates about compensation, public commemorations, and – not least – individual memories of former forced laborers themselves spoke of “slave work” or adopted corresponding argumentations. How did they view their forced labor against that ‘slavery’ background?

Different possible sources may be examined to answer this question, ranging from judicial documents and press publications to representations in films, monuments, and museums. I will concentrate on written or videotaped testimonies and private photographs of former forced laborers.

Personal testimonies and pictorial evidence, however, do pose certain methodological problems that cannot be discussed here (Young, Pagenstecher). These biographical sources reflect different postwar memory cultures that have recently been a subject of intensive research (Plato et al). As in the case of American slavery, the current interest in former forced laborers’ narratives has grown enormously. Historians and memory workers have tried to restore voice and dignity to those forgotten victims who have been silenced for so many decades. Furthermore, these narratives help to recognize the victims as individual actors in history. It is, however, important, especially in Germany, not to forget the analysis of perpetrators and bystanders by concentrating one’s research solely on the victims of Nazi crimes.

## Historical Overview

National Socialist Germany created one of the largest systems of forced labor in history. Over twelve million people from over twenty European countries were forced to work for Germany during the Second World War (Herbert; Sporerer, *Hakenkreuz*). In the summer of 1944 alone, six million foreign civilians, two million prisoners of war, and over half a million concentration camp prisoners worked in the German Reich. The biggest groups came from Poland and the Soviet Union. A sixth of the foreigners, but half of the Soviet workers, were women, who sometimes had been deported to Germany together with their children or gave birth to them in the camps.

All occupied countries were used as workforce reservoirs. Attempts at voluntary recruitment had little success; from 1940 not only Czechs and Poles, but also a growing number of Dutch, Belgians, and French were conscripted. In the occu-

pied territories, too, millions of men, women, and children were forced to work for the enemy.

Initially, the Nazis did not want large numbers of foreigners to enter the Reich, fearing hostile political activities, military espionage, or “contamination” of “Aryan blood.” After the failure of the attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, however, economic and military needs overruled racist concerns. In 1942, the armament minister Albert Speer and the plenipotentiary for labor deployment Fritz Sauckel began organizing the forced labor of millions of foreigners in the war economy, combining racist repression with efficient exploitation. Starting that same year, in the Soviet Union, tens of thousands were rounded up on the streets and deported to Germany. Thus, Nazi forced labor was not only closely connected to the course of the Second World War, but it was also integrated into a modern, industrial war economy and an urban society, whereas other forms of slavery, although their modern aspects have been underlined recently, were primarily part of agricultural economies and societies.

During the Second World War foreigners had to work in agriculture and construction, in industry and on the railroad, in private households and the public sector. It was the forced laborers who kept German arms production and food supply going. German industry profited from the increased production, which also helped bring about the post-war economic ‘miracle.’ The import of a foreign workforce that suffered massive discrimination offered many Germans opportunities for social advancement: even poorly qualified German workers became foremen and overseers. Unlike the rest of Europe, the German population did not suffer hunger until 1945, thanks to forced labor in agriculture and the exploitation of the occupied territories (Aly).

All foreign workers were meticulously registered and controlled by a racial-bureaucratic repressive apparatus comprising the police, Wehrmacht, SS, labor office, and company security guards, thus creating a mixture of private and state slavery. Different from the entirely commercial slavery system in the US, where the planters themselves owned and commanded their slaves and overseers, in Germany there were some conflicts between the slave-‘owning’ SS, Gestapo, and *Wehrmacht* and the slave-‘exploiting’ companies or their associations. But these intra-regime tensions between work efficiency and war economy on one side, and racialized ideology and state terror on the other side, tend to be overstated in some studies simply because they have produced more archival material. They also fitted well into the historiographical debate between those who saw a central racist mastermind at the heart of Nazi politics and those who stressed conflicting interests of competing actors within a polycratic system of power. No matter, whether National Socialism is being interpreted as Hitler’s personal dictatorship, as a racial state, as a capitalist class system, or as a bureaucratic regime that relied on the buy-in of the German populace, the discriminatory exploitation system of forced labor generally functioned well.

The foreigners lived in terrible sanitary conditions, often fell ill, and usually remained hungry after working long hours. They were extremely vulnerable to Allied bomb raids, much more so than the general German population, their housing consisting of overcrowded, bug infested barracks or disused restaurants and ballrooms. In Berlin alone about three thousand camps of a variety of sizes are documented, which means that they were essentially around the corner from the home of every German citizen (Pagenstecher, Bremberger and Wenzel 96ff., 137ff., 183ff.). The so-called *Fremdvölkische* were highly visible on their daily way to work as well as during their labor in the factories and fields.<sup>1</sup> Discrimination was part of war routine and was opposed by very few Germans. Still, a certain number of Germans were persecuted because of illegal contact with foreigners, whether the connection was motivated by sexual attraction, political solidarity, or religious compassion.

## Differentiations

The term “forced labor” encompasses a range of quite distinctly different forms of work assignments; as in other historical contexts there were various degrees of ‘slavery’ under the Nazi regime. The living conditions of the forced laborers varied depending on status, work location, national origin, and gender as well as on the type and size of the camp in which the workers lived. The principal groups consisted of prisoners of concentration camps, civilian workers, and prisoners of war. The majority of camps fell into the following categories: concentration camps (*Konzentrationslager* or *KZ*), extermination camps, *KZ* satellite camps, and external *Kommandos* (workteams), ghettos, forced labor camps for Jews, labor education camps, prisoner of war camps (*Stalags*), and – by far outnumbering the rest – camps for civilian workers. The principal groups consisted of prisoners of concentration camps, civilian workers, and prisoners of war. Working conditions and violence levels differed vastly depending on the type of camp (civilian or concentration camp) and on national or religious origin of the laborers (West European, East European or Jewish).

Romany (Gypsy) as well as Jewish slave laborers became victims of “extermination through labor.” Quantitative research methods, although sometimes risking too much abstraction and distance from the actual violence, demonstrate the extremely high mortality rates of Jewish prisoners (especially in construction *Kommandos*) compared to civilian West Europeans and particularly on industrial work sites (Freund). On the other hand, work was often the only chance of surviving the *Shoah*, of which Steven Spielberg’s highly popular film *Schindler’s List* (1993) is an exemplary depiction.

1 Pejorative term used in Nazi racist ideology for foreigners not belonging to – what the Nazis construed as – the ‘Germanic’ race.

People of Slavic descent were also discriminated against on racist grounds, particularly the so-called *Ostarbeiter* (Eastern workers) from the Soviet Union. And the “Italian Military Internees,” deported to Germany after the Italian cease-fire in 1943, were denounced as traitors and also treated miserably.

By contrast, civilian forced laborers had more freedom than prisoners of war or concentration camp prisoners. Forced labor in mines and construction was a lot worse than domestic or agricultural work. Conditions in the occupied territories differed considerably from those in the Reich, and women suffered additional harassment. These circumstances changed considerably during the course of the war, as did the behavior of individual commanders, guards, employers, and foremen, both in the workplace and the camps.

As with all racist systems, Nazi Germany was obsessed with racial classifications. It had to specifically ‘signpost’ different groups of *Untermenschen* (sub-humans) because they looked more or less the same as ‘real’ Germans; unlike with the ‘black’ American slaves, there were no clearly visible signs of racial otherness. In the concentration camps, prisoners had to wear striped uniforms, with textile triangles of different colors indicating the different prisoner categories: political (red), Jehova’s Witnesses (purple), *Asoziale* (antisocial elements) (black), and professional criminals (green). Among civilian foreigners, workers from Poland and the Soviet Union had to wear special badges, with either “P” or “OST” written on them. In March 1940, the Gestapo issued detailed orders concerning the form and size of the “P” badge, which preceded the special badges – the yellow star – that Jews had to wear first in Germany from September 1941 onwards. Some especially hard-working *Ostarbeiter* were rewarded by being allowed to wear the “OST” badge on the left arm instead of – as usual – on the right side of the chest (Wooock 128).

Slavery was no longer seen as an appropriate economic system for European countries in the twentieth century, and Germany had signed the League of Nation’s Slavery Convention in 1926. Even the Nazis rarely used the word “slave,” particularly not in reference to their long-term plans for the exploitation of Eastern European *Arbeitsvölker* (peoples deemed only fit for labor) after the Third Reich’s expected Second World War victory. In spite of such linguistic practice, their vision of the future was clearly one of a German slaveholder society.

In the short run, however, the civilian foreign workers were treated according to a mixture of established labor and migration bureaucracy, including registration, documentation, and insurance, but were also ruled by specific pieces of anti-Slavonic and anti-Semitic legislation. The system of discrimination followed a clear race hierarchy, although political and juridical factors were intertwined. The Nazi bureaucracy issued instructions to its lower ranks in the form of leaflets that precisely defined the different ethnic groups and the appropriate forms of treatment that were determined according to each group’s rung on a presumed ethnic ladder. Nonetheless there was no clear or consistent nomenclature: in the con-

temporary documents we encounter words such as “aliens,” “foreign workers,” “Fremdvölkische,” “Ostarbeiter,” and “prisoners,” but also “guest workers” and colloquial words, for example, “Russenweiber” (Russian broads).

Moreover, there was also a link between socio-economic and ‘racial’ status. As Mark Spoerer has stressed, the connection between a person’s level in this racist hierarchy and the level of prosperity of her or his home country. He argues that we find almost a direct correlation between Nazi race groupings and the pre-war gross domestic product (GDP) of different European countries (Spoerer, *Differenzierung* 570). Leaving aside the specifics of anti-Semitism, this correlation – racism affects the poor disproportionately – also applies in many other contexts, even today.

In the course of the war, with defeat looming, Germans began to search for support in neighboring countries, trying to rally European peoples behind the *Führer* in his proclaimed war against Bolshevism. *Europe works in Germany* was the title of an illustrated book commissioned by Fritz Sauckel. The opulent volume, published in several languages, contains photographs showing laughing workers in well-organized camps and clean workplaces (Didier). Officials, such as Gotthold Starke from the German foreign office, tried to counter Stalin’s “enslavement” propaganda and now wanted to “engage the Ostarbeiter for a new Europe and thereby for the German war potential” (Pagenstecher, Bremberger and Wenzel 222).

The number of forced laborers under the Third Reich (twelve million) is consonant with other slave systems in history. This enormous number of people was, however, deported, forced to work, and if not killed, liberated within a very short period of time. Only seven years lay between the beginning of labor enforcement for German Jews in 1938 (*Geschlossener Arbeitseinsatz*) (Gruner) and the liberation of the camps in 1945. The system of the KZ satellite camps operated mainly during the last two years of the war.

The rapid and enormous growth of the forced labor system proves the ruthless efficiency of its organizers, but makes systematic cultural studies difficult. The German slaveholder society – fortunately – was halted while still in process. Unlike the African American context, a specific *habitus* or culture of forced laborers had insufficient time to develop, even though various studies have proven the importance of cultural activities of the concentration camp prisoners (e.g., Jaiser, Brauer).

## The Czech example



Fig. 1: “Otroci XX. století, Berlin 43,” (“Slaves of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Berlin [19]43.” Private photograph of Czech workers (Archiv BGW/Svaz nuceně nasazených).

A private photograph from the archive of the *Svaz nuceně nasazených* (SNN), a Czech survivors’ association, shows Czech workers in Berlin gathered around a table on which a bag has been placed on which is written *Otroci XX. století, Berlin 43* (Slaves of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Berlin [19]43.) These workers do not look like slaves, however. They are all well-groomed, are all wearing suits and ties, and most are smiling for the camera. But the simple wooden table and the locker with displaying pictures hint at where the photograph was taken: in a barrack of a camp for forced laborers. To be precise, it was taken in a camp of the Ambi Budd metal factory in Berlin’s South Eastern industrial district Treptow-Johannisthal.

The names of these ‘slaves’ are unknown. They are, however, civilian workers from the Protectorate, i.e., what remained of Czechoslovakia after the September 1938 Munich treaty and the March 1939 occupation of Prague. Since 1938 a growing number of Czechs had been compelled to work in Germany due to increasing economic hardship and political pressure. Like laborers from other countries, the Czechs were sometimes called volunteers, although later, during the war, most of them were denied the chance to return home.

Ever since 1942 entire age groups of Czechs had been conscripted to the *Totaleinsatz* (total effort) in the Reich (*Im Totaleinsatz*, Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt, *Totaleinsatz*). All in all, more than four hundred thousand Czechs worked as forced laborers in Germany. They occupied an intermediate position in the Nazis’

racial status hierarchy, being part of the lower Slavonic “race” on the one side, but an urban, well-trained, often German-speaking work force on the other. As with French and Dutch workers, they were allowed to bring photographs and take pictures, which was prohibited for Poles and Russians. As citizens of the Protectorate, legally they were not aliens, but called *Inländer besonderer Art* (nationals of a particular kind). In their registration and work documents, however, German officials gave them all different kinds of labels, such as *Tscheche* (Czech) or *BuM* (*Böhmen und Mähren*/Bohemia and Moravia), demonstrating the difficulties German authorities had in putting their sophisticated racist hierarchy into practice. While civilian Czech workers can hardly be labeled slaves, many were sent to concentration camps, among them about seventy-three thousand Jews and six thousand Gypsies. And many civilian laborers were sent to punitive or concentration camps for leaving their workplace or even allegedly planning acts of sabotage.

František Vendiš, born in 1921, worked for the Siemens Company in Berlin-Spandau from 1942 to 1945. As a qualified electrician, he found conditions bearable. Despite the fact that he was forced to labor by the enemy, after the war, like other (mostly male) civilian workers, he recalled the quality of his work with a certain pride. In the depraved situation of forced labor, work itself was one of the few sources of self-regard and dignity. Nevertheless, Vendiš tried to escape in 1943, but was soon tracked down by the Gestapo and sent to a “labor education camp” for six weeks, where horrible conditions reigned. He was then taken back to Siemens. At the end of his testimony, written in 1997, he asked for help in getting compensation from Siemens. At the time, he was writing about his experiences, a book whose Czech title, significantly, translates as *The Memories of a White Slave* (Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt, *Totaleinsatz* 9).

## Postwar debates

A departure from most other slaveholder societies, the Nazi system of forced labor underwent juridical prosecution immediately after the breakdown of the Reich in 1945. The term “slave labor” played a major role during the Nuremberg trials of Nazi leaders such as Fritz Sauckel, in his capacity as the plenipotentiary for labor deployment. “The evidence shows that Sauckel was in charge of a program which involved deportation for slave labor of more than 5,000,000 human beings, many of them under terrible conditions of cruelty and suffering” (“Judgement against Sauckel”).

The prosecution successfully proved Sauckel’s and Speer’s responsibility for the – what it called – the “slave labor program.” The Allied judges did not discuss in detail the meaning of this term, but used it to specifically refer to the deportation and deployment of civilian foreign workers, not to concentration camp prisoners. Even West European civilians who were forced to work in Ger-

many but who could move about freely within cities, and some of whom even lived in private accommodations, were called slave laborers. Maybe it was partly this failure to distinguish between civilian workers and concentration camp prisoners that allowed postwar Germany to almost completely ignore the court's findings concerning mass deportation and exploitation of forced labor, together with the general rejection of the Nuremberg trials as 'victors' justice.' For the German public, forced laborers became forgotten victims of National Socialism. The survivors were only remembered as 'displaced persons' post-1945 and, furthermore, were often portrayed as members of criminal gangs because after their liberation they stole food from German neighbors or sometimes took revenge on cruel employers or guards.

Foreign victims had no voice in Germany and forced labor was not recognized as a specific Nazi crime. Once the war ended, the camp barracks, which had been home for so many of the laborers, were either destroyed or used for refugees or migrants. Every effort was made to totally eliminate or at least obscure traces of the enforced laborers' presence. And the typical postwar German word *Fremdarbeiter* (a term still used today in Switzerland for foreign workers) erased any notion that force or coercion had been involved in bringing them into the huge apparatus that was the Third Reich.

In 1953, the German Federal Compensation Law excluded most foreign forced laborers from receiving payments. In the London Debt Treaty of the same year, West Germany managed to postpone the question of compensation until after a peace treaty was signed, which in the end never materialized. To avoid further discussion, the government paid lump sums to Israel and some Western countries, but nothing to East Europe and nothing to individuals (Goschler).

It was victim groups that advocated for use of the term "slave labor." In 1951, in one of the first German trials held on Nazi forced labor, Norbert Wollheim demanded compensation from the former IG Farben company, which had used him as "slave worker" while he was a prisoner at the KZ Auschwitz (see "Wollheim-Memorial"). In general, however, the former forced laborers could not file suit against their former persecutors or "owners" because after 1945 they had returned to their home countries. Unlike in other slavery contexts, the liberated 'slaves' had left the slaveholder society completely and had no influence in either of the two German states.

Once back home, especially in the then Soviet Union, the returnees were, across the board, suspected of having collaborated with the Germans. Some were placed in Stalinist camps, others were discriminated against at work. Some people did not even tell their families about their forced labor experience. Most still suffer physical and psychological consequences of their forced labor and, especially in Eastern Europe, live in deep poverty.

In many European countries, public remembrance centered on armed resistance and liberating armies, not on the civilians forced to work for the enemy. In France, the former workers of the *Service du travail obligatoire* tried hard to gain

a place in the national memorial culture as *Déportés du travail*. In Poland, the millions of civilian forced laborers made up the bulk of the population and were remembered as ‘normality,’ whereas former KZ prisoners were and are a different victim group, their slave labor essentially ignored.

For decades, German governments and industry refused to pay any adequate compensation to the former forced laborers. In the 1990s however, political pressure grew in support of individual compensation for forced laborers, civilians and prisoners alike.

Between 1998 and 2000, boycott threats and legal class actions in the US forced the German state and industry to set up the foundation *Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft* (Remembrance, Responsibility and Future,) which between 2001 and 2007 made a onetime payment of between 500 and 7,700 Euros to former forced laborers, depending on the circumstances of their persecution. Prisoners of war and other groups of victims received no compensation at all (Jansen and Saathoff, Eizenstat).

Lengthy talks between German companies and politicians, American lawyers, and associations of Nazi victims took place prior to the agreement on financial compensation in 2000. During the debates, Jewish victims’ associations stressed the very different conditions faced by concentration camp prisoners and civil forced laborers, as well as by Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners. The term “forced and slave labor” was increasingly used to draw a – more or less clear-cut – conceptual distinction between concentration camp prisoners and civil workers, which was also supposed to help determine different levels of payment.

Some historians criticized the term “slave labor” as trivializing the “extermination by work” program of the SS, which – in contrast to the agenda of the farmers in the American South – placed little or no value on the life of its “slaves.” Spoerer (*Hakenkreuz* 17) argues, therefore, that the term “slave worker” would be most appropriate for the Ostarbeiter, if not for the KZ prisoners.

The prominent American jurist Benjamin Ferencz, chief prosecutor at one of Nuremberg trials and, for decades, an advocate for compensation of Holocaust victims, summed up this argument as early as 1979 in the title of his book, *Less than Slaves*. Interestingly, however, the German translation of the title, *Lohn des Grauens*, which could be translated as “Wage of Horror,” omits this reference to slavery.

Since these debates, the differentiation between ‘slave’ and ‘forced’ labor has governed many procedures in the compensation process. For instance, on 17 February 1999, the German president, Johannes Rau, solemnly declared: “I pay tribute to all those who were subjected to slave and forced labor under German rule, and, in the name of the German people, beg forgiveness.” Sometimes the term slave labor is used only for Jewish prisoners of concentration camps or ghettos, sometimes for all inmates of concentration camps but not for civilian workers or prisoners of war. The German federal law establishing the foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future” distinguishes between forced labor in concen-

tration camps, ghettos, and similar camps (category A) and forced labor under prisonlike conditions (category B), but does use the word “slave labor” in its preamble, “recognizing that the National Socialist State inflicted severe injustice on slave laborers and forced laborers.”

In the press, these separations were not always strictly observed. CNN World, for example, reported on 12 February 2002: “A group of German schoolchildren has donated nearly \$15,000 to Ukrainians who had been forced to work as Nazi slave laborers in their hometown during World War II. [...] Two million [Ukrainians] were sent to concentration camps or became ‘Ostarbeiters’, Hitler’s main slave labor source.” German journalists usually printed pictures of concentration camp prisoners wearing their striped uniforms when writing about civilian Ostarbeiters, who actually did not wear this uniform. “What is the price of Hitler’s labor slaves today?” *Die Zeit* wondered in 1997 (Kleine-Brockhof). On a local level, in many German cities the responsibility of public authorities, private companies, churches, and institutions for ‘forced and slave labor’ has been the subject of debate (*Heinkel in Rostock*). Following the compensation payments, the foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future” initiated an interview project called “Documentation of Biographical Interviews with Former Slave and Forced Laborers.” Whereas the corresponding book is entitled *Hitler’s slaves* (Plato et al.), the accompanying website, including an online interview archive, is called “Forced labor 1939-1945” (*Zwangsarbeit-Archiv*). Generally, “forced labor” seems to have become the academically accepted generic term. Yet, the ways in which these words are used in different countries, as well as by survivors and former workers, have remained contested, partly because of their links to the thorny issue of national memorial cultures.

## Testimonies

For the purpose of studying the role of ‘slavery’ in survivors’ testimonies, I looked at two resources: During the 1990s, the Berlin History Workshop collected hundreds of written testimonies and private photographs from former Czech, Polish, Ukrainian, and Belorussian civilian workers in Berlin. A similar collection of letters from former Soviet POWs was assembled by the Kontakte association, also in Berlin (Kontakte). *Die Freie Universität* (The Free University) Berlin is currently developing a digital interview archive containing almost six hundred audio and video interviews with former slave and forced laborers. The web-based archive platform “Forced Labor 1939-1945: Memory and History” provides access to the collection of testimonies compiled by the *FernUniversität* (Distance-learning University) Hagen and financed by the RRF (Archiv ZWAR, see Plato et al., Pagenstecher, *Remembering*).

Drawing on these sources, I have looked at the ways the word “slave” is used in the testimonies. This paper cannot present a statistical analysis of Nazi forced

labor because my research is based on material from different collections of testimonies, it uses the German translations only, and it is restricted to the electronically searchable parts of the collections, which, until now, are only part have not yet been fully indexed.

However, this survey shows the following tentative results: slavery is far from being a dominant collective memory pattern of former forced laborers. Only about a tenth of the testimonies use the word “slave.” The references to slavery in testimonies do not correspond to the degree of persecution and terror or to the hardships of life under German rule. Only three out of seventy-nine former Ostarbeiters wrote about “slavery,” and Soviet prisoners of war also described themselves as “slaves” to a lesser degree than witnesses of other nationalities. For example, this term occurs in twenty-five out of two hundred fourteen Polish written testimonies. Within all national groups, academics and intellectuals taking part in historic-political debates apparently use this term more often.

Obviously, the word “slave” is used when the witnesses want to emphasize the humiliation and the anger they felt. The Ukrainian Michail K. still displayed such anger in 1997 when he wrote: “How can one forget, what we experienced, if there was the stamp ‘slave’ on the work document? This was a terrible period. I worked in [Berlin-]Köpenick and I was dragged off to work by guards with a dog! Write that down, so that your youth will know what a fascist was!” (Archiv BGW, zwa.br.ost 329)

Some witnesses refer to slavery in order to connect their personal experiences to historical narratives that carry a particular significance within their cultural background or connected to their particular heritage. One of the Jewish survivors recalls the slavery of the Hebrews in pharaonic Egypt. Upset by his memories, he has trouble talking about his captivity, likening his traumatic experience of slavery to a nightmare that continues to haunt him: “I am a kind of slave, sold, that means, they do to you whatever they want. [...] I am willing to tell more [...] this is simply a nightmare. [...] Slaves we were in Egypt” (Shalom A., Archiv ZWAR, za094).

An Italian Military Internee, whose mother was born in the Caribbean, compared his own forced labor to Caribbean slavery. Very active for years in memory and compensation initiatives, he wrote books about “Hitler’s slaves” while also collecting his mother’s and grandmother’s memories of Guadeloupe. (Claudio S., Archiv ZWAR, za126). For another Italian survivor, financial compensation meant the – belated – German recognition that she was one of “Hitler’s slaves” (Carla M., Archiv ZWAR, no S.).

This issue of recognition and compensation is probably the most important context in which survivors talk about their “slavery” experience. Due to its highly public use during the compensation debate, the slave labor argument is now mostly employed when talking about the reluctance of German companies or government officials to accede to the compensation demands by their former ‘slave workers.’ A former Soviet POW wrote to the German NGO *Kontakte*: “The

moral damages and the slave labor must be compensated with the highest rates.” (Archiv Kontakte, Freitagsbriefe Nr. 51) A Polish witness forced to work for Lufthansa wrote: “Today this wealthy aviation company has forgotten its slaves and paying for forced labor.” (Archiv BGW, zwa.br.pl 607)

Many survivors were outraged about the need to prove their deportation as forced laborers. A Ukrainian woman wrote: “The ‘Arbeitsbuch’ [workbook] is being asked for, where we worked, in which city [...] Do you follow me, who would have given us an ‘Arbeitsbuch’? All they gave us were beatings. We were seen as slaves. If we had become ill, we would have been burnt in the ovens.” (Archiv BGW, zwa.br.ost 377) Active members of survivors’ associations, including the earlier mentioned František Vendiš, were more outspoken in articulating this argument than were others. Testimonies recorded after 1999, i.e., during or after the intensive compensation debate, used the concept of ‘slave labor’ more often than did those recorded prior to this period.

The struggle for recognition and compensation was fought in the survivors’ home countries and by their national associations as well. The former Italian Military Internee Claudio S. recalled his answer when he was called a Nazi collaborator after his return to Italy in 1945: “We were hungry for two years; we were slaves, not collaborators” (Claudio S., Archiv ZWAR, za126). A Jewish Dutch camp survivor was astonished that every concentration camp prisoner, whether having been forced to work or not, received part of the compensation money “that originally was reserved for people that really had done slave labor” (Hannelore G., Archiv ZWAR, no S). These declarations reveal the chronic marginalization of former forced laborers in Europe’s memory. This suppression is one that Nazi forced labor shares with other national cultures of remembrance, cultures that incorporated various forms of slavery on other continents and in different centuries.

The witnesses also use the word “slave” when remembering their first days of forced labor. After demeaning sanitary and screening procedures by medical commissions, their bodies were sold to their new employers, either at the transit camp locations or from in front of the labor offices. A Czech former forced laborer wrote about Wilhelmshagen on the outskirts of Berlin, a transit camp from which companies picked up newly arrived workers and transported them to their own camps: “In this [Wilhelmshagen] camp I spent four days and could watch how transports of modern slaves were brought here every day.” (Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt, *Totaleinsatz* 63) In November 1942, Stanisława T. was deported as a 17-year old girl after a *razzia* (raid) in her Polish hometown and brought to a place near Berlin: “In this town a kind of slave market was organized, where the buyers selected us.” (Archiv BGW, zwa.br.pl 409) Another Polish woman remembered: “On 12 May 1942 on the square in front of the labor office a slave market was organized, where people selected for forced labor were being sold. I was bought for two Reichsmark by a 32-year[-]old German woman.” (Archiv BGW, zwa.br.pl 604) Yet another Polish witness remembered: “I was deported to Berlin

at the age of 17. This was a kind of slave commerce, only that we did not end up in a brothel.” Instead, she worked at the AEG electric factory (Archiv BGW, zwa.br.pl 469). In these testimonies, the word “slave” is closely connected with the humiliating procedure of humans being rented out or sold to their new owners.

The word “slave” is also often used when describing other groups: “Our barracks were in the centre of the camp, on one side were the barracks of the Russian slaves, on the other side those of the Italians” (Archiv BGW, zwa.br.pl 534). A Polish witness remembers being transferred into another camp: “This was a catastrophe again. The barracks were old; French slaves had lived there before. It was dirty, an unbearable stench, beds falling apart, torn mattresses[,] etc” (Archiv BGW, zwa.br.pl 486).

Sometimes these remarks are full of compassion for the way in which other groups were dealt with by the Germans: “They treated the Italian slaves in our department with much suspicion” (Archiv BGW, zwa.br.pl 522). One witness, however, a Dutch Jewish woman, referred to a workmate as a “slave soul,” using the term pejoratively. When, after a pause in work due to missing material deliveries, work started again, one of her Hungarian workmates said: “Thank God, material again.” The witness remembered: “You know what I thought? ‘This is a slave’s soul, she thinks like her boss.’ Later, this definition seemed very right to me” (Bloeme E., Archiv ZWAR, no S).

## Conclusion

With a brutal mixture of racist ideology and economic efficiency, Nazi Germany created one of the largest systems of forced labor in history. Due to enormous differences in their living and working conditions, not all the twelve million forced laborers can be labeled “slaves.” Such a distinction, however, does not imply any criticism of survivors who experienced their fate as slavery. Marc Buggeln correctly emphasizes: “There is no doubt that the self-characterization of former prisoners as ‘slaves’ is morally legitimate” (102).

In fact, the words “slave” and “slavery” played an important role in the postwar discourse about Nazi forced labor. Slavery served as a point of reference in verdicts of postwar trials, in compensation debates, and in individual memories. Whereas the Nuremberg trials put forward a very broad concept of ‘slave labor,’ in the compensation debates of the 1990s, the distinction between “slave labor” and “forced labor” became a focal point of the public debate and, sometimes, also of differentiation between separate victim groups.

Comparing German companies to slaveholders not only underpinned the compensation demands, but also helped survivors and commentators to cope with a phenomenon unprecedented in size, brutality, and rapid development. The brief survey of testimonies presented here shows a variety of individual interpretation

patterns in different contexts, and also indicates the influence that public memorial cultures have had on individual memory.

Many, though by far not all former forced laborers portray their experiences in German camps as a form of slavery. Feliksa W. from Poland, for example, wrote in 1999: “I was 15 years old at the time, we lived in disgusting barracks, fenced in with barbed wire, we were hungry and it was freezing. We were treated like slaves. I have very sad memories of this time” (Archiv BGW, zwa.br.pl 638).

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