

Tobias Böckow, Franka Bindernagel. *Ein KZ in der Nachbarschaft: Das Magdeburger Aussenlager der Brabag und der "Freundeskreis Himmler".* Cologne and Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2004. 225 pp. EUR 19.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-412-04904-1.



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The Use of Slave Labor in the Fuel Production Industry of the Third Reich

Böckow and Bindernagel have performed an excellent service by providing empirical information about the workings of an important war industry and the slave labor system that supported it. Their macro and micro view of the system helps the reader put into a framework many pieces of the military-industrial complex under the NSDAP: the economic structure, the ideological structure, and the labor requirements and subsequent manipulations of the labor force. The authors' concentration, however, is on one outer camp for which they provide a case study.

The Braunkohle-Benzin Aktiengesellschaft, called "Brabag," was founded in 1934, and between 1938 and 1945 became the most important producer of fuel in the Reich. Its aim was to produce synthetic fuel products and become the backbone of the government's self-sufficiency (*Autarkie*) efforts and policies. Up to 90 percent of the country's fuel was projected to emerge from these synthetic products.

Hjalmar Schacht, Reichswirtschaftsminister and President of the Reichsbank, led the effort with the cooperation of the leading industrialists in this economic

sector, who financed the operation with contributions from leading banks and industries, financial considerations by the Reich, and spreading the investment to private small stock holders. The investment grew to 600 Million Reichmark (RM) by the end of the war (p. 39).

Fritz Kranefuss became the Nazi party representative to the executive board of the Brabag. A member of Himmler's inner circle, Kranefuss was responsible for obtaining the first 13,000 slave laborers from concentration camps and setting up the first six outer camps for Brabag. Kranefuss was also one of the forty-four members of "Himmler's Freundeskreis" and, thus, personified the tie among the party, the SS, and the industrialists.

Böckow and Bindernagel describe the structure and operation of Himmler's *Freundeskreis* and explain how it interacted with the slave labor assignments to industry and in particular to Brabag. They bring to the foreground members of the group who had previously been relegated to minor positions in the literature, as instigators of transports and assignments of prisoners to Brabag's concentration camps.

The authors describe the various kinds of forced labor that took place in National Socialist Germany under Oswald Pohl (pp. 71-77). While in 1942 Himmler gave the order to all concentration camp commanders to make their camps "free of Jews," by 1944 the labor shortage in Germany caused the policy to be reversed. In April 1944, Hitler ordered 100,000 Jewish prisoners from Hungary to be transported into the Reich for vital war production. Six months later, almost 100,000 Jews found themselves in slave labor in the Reich, most in outer camps feeding the needs of the war industry (pp. 73-75).

At the same time, the bombing of industrial areas, including the Brabag works, was intensifying, damaging more than half of the air fuel production capability. Armaments minister Albert Speer put out the order that all measures would henceforth be taken to keep the production of fuel as the top priority. A huge effort to relocate to underground tunnels led to the death of thousands of prisoners (p. 84). B       and Bindernagel discuss the employment of increasing numbers of slave laborers at tasks of relocation, rebuilding, and clearing bombed-out areas, so that the work of fuel production could go forward.

Hitler and Speer placed Edmund Geilenberg in charge of getting bombed sites up and running after bombardments. Geilenberg became the executioner of Speer's will (p. 83). It became possible for laborers and concentration camp inmates to have a plant functioning at some level only days after an attack. Many of the men doing this dangerous work were Hungarian Jews whose death rate far exceeded that of the prisoners working in production.

The Brabag executive committee decided late in 1943 to use slave labor, and the arrival of Hungarian Jews in 1944 provided the work force they needed. As the laborers were exhausted and incapable, they were removed to main camps where they could be disposed of (pp. 102-103). The authors make it clear that the decisions on conditions for the use of slave labor were shared by the SS and the industrialists and often revolved around labor needed at a particular time and place (p. 106).

In Fall 1944, one thousand concentration camp prisoners moved a part of the Magdeburg production center into the hills not far from the city. Twenty-two tunnels had to be dug, requiring more than six thousand prisoner laborers (p. 108). The authors provide information about the toll on the prisoners of this inhumane work assignment.

B       and Bindernagel's major interest, however,

is the outer camp at Magdeburg/ Rothensee. The well-situated plant was located virtually within a settlement of forty-five middle-class families, separated by a barbed-wire fence and guarded by watch-towers. From the middle of June 1944 until February 9, 1945, more than two thousand Hungarian Jews worked there as a work commando from Buchenwald. The authors state that more than 50 percent of the guards in concentration camps were members of the Wehrmacht who exchanged duty on the front with guard duty in concentration camps on a regular basis (p. 120). The movement of these men, with the resulting communications among family and community, guaranteed that the conditions of the camp were widely known, and ordinary Germans had access to much more information than came to them through official sources.

B       and Bindernagel see the concentration camp system within view of the population as a subsystem of the society, visible through perforated boundaries. A variety of townspeople worked within the structure or did business with it. Workers within socialized with those outside the borders: "The National Socialist crimes were in the middle of the society and grew in part with them through the participation of single or entire social groups" (p. 172). While neighbors might have viewed the concentration camp with horror and fear, they also may have felt curiosity, apprehension, and hatred toward the prisoners.

It is not possible to assess the exact toll on the prisoners of incarceration in Magdeburg/Rothensee. There were 550 known dead among the more than 2,000 prisoners, but another 1,121 were transported back to Buchenwald or sent to Bergen-Belsen when they were "used up" to die.

Some of the material in this book will be familiar to the reader with a serious interest in the labor and KZ policies of the Third Reich. However, much will also be new. It is a valuable contribution via its provision of details so often lacking concerning how the concentration camp played out in certain locales and under certain conditions. The authors do an excellent job of representing victims' experiences and identifying actors who participated in the design of slave labor. They are outspoken in naming names and identifying perpetrators and those who helped them, those who profited, and those who built careers upon the deadly mishandling of others.

Despite these many strengths, this book does not seem to be as well-organized as this reader would have liked. The title is somewhat misleading, as the concen-

tration camp in the neighborhood is not really discussed until the end of the book. The book is really about the development of the Brabag industries and their developing leadership and use of concentration camp labor within the confines of the system. The emphasis on the use of Hungarian Jews in that system is confusing—as it is introduced at different times—and could have been handled

more effectively as a discussion of the total workforce with that population's role as a highlight.

My criticisms are minor, however. The book stands as a well-documented and readable addition to concentration camp literature. Scholars interested in the topics of the camps and use of slave labor would do well to add it to their collections.

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