



**Hermann Kaienburg.** *Die Wirtschaft der SS.* Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2003. 1200 S. EUR 49.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-936411-04-1.



**Reviewed by** Alex Kay (Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Kriegsfolgen-Forschung)

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## **An Economic Empire built on Forced Labor**

Long before Hermann Kaienburg explicitly points out, on page 1,035 of his mammoth study on the SS economy, that the work of concentration camp prisoners constituted the SS's "most important asset," it becomes clear to the reader that the economic empire of the SS was one built on forced labor. By 1944/45, approximately 700,000 concentration camp inmates were imprisoned in a total of more than one thousand KZ satellite camps dotted over Germany, Austria and the bordering territories still under German rule (pp. 391, 431). The exploitation of this form of labor belonged to the "basic principles" of the SS economy (p. 1,017). The mentality of abuse so evident in the terror and security tasks of the SS for which it is best known also flowed into the establishment and growth of its economic enterprises.

In the introduction to his book, Kaienburg convincingly argues the case for writing a work of this nature by pointing to the many gaps in the existing literature on SS economic concerns. The author does make clear that he was only able to take into consideration new publications up to 1998 (p. 35). It would certainly have been interesting, however, to know how Jan Erik Schulte's work on Oswald Pohl and the SS's Economy and Administration Main Office (Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt,

WVHA), might have influenced Kaienburg's results.[1] The goal of Kaienburg's work is to describe the aims and developments of the SS economy by surveying individual periods and various subdivisions. Furthermore, the author recognizes that the exhaustive amount of source material he has consulted allows for the development of a more complete overall picture of the topic than has been available (p. 32). In the realization of these aims, Kaienburg is successful. Following the introduction, the book is broken down into four main sections, which are in turn divided into chapters and sub-chapters. The first examines the pre-1933/1934 history of the SS in general; the second focuses on the economic ventures of the SS during the period 1933 to 1939; the third examines the years 1938/1939 to 1945; and the fourth and final section is devoted to analyzing the aims and results of the SS economy.

Any SS interest in the field of economics is barely detectable before 1934. This attitude changed with the events of June and July 1934 and the demise of the SA, which allowed the SS to move into the foreground and assert itself as the most important instrument for the consolidation of Hitler's power (p. 83). With the transfer of control over concentration camps to the SS in 1934, eco-

conomic concerns and workshops were set up at the camps to take care of the personal requirements of the camps themselves and those SS members employed in them, namely the Death's Head Units (p. 114). The economic complex at Dachau was the first to be established. Kaienburg postulates that Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler envisaged at a very early stage that the SS should profit from the manpower of the concentration camp inmates and in this way establish an at least partial economic autonomy (p. 117). Indeed, the SS leadership made plans long before the outbreak of war for an increase in the number of prisoners in the camps as soon as war broke out. Likewise, the expansion of the KZ workshops into large SS concerns was by no means an improvised reaction to unforeseen developments (pp. 858-859 and 1,091). As Kaienburg consistently makes clear, their aim from the beginning was to achieve the most extensive supply of SS units possible by means of exploiting the prisoners (pp. 463, 857 and 1,000-1,006).

Himmler played a very hands-on role in economic matters. All fundamental decisions crossed his desk (p. 229). Usually the varied economic concerns, associations and trusts controlled, and in some cases owned, by the SS emerged as a result of Himmler's direct involvement, sometimes at his personal instigation (p. 234). Economic enterprises had become so important to Himmler by the late 1930s that the establishment of new concentration camps was dependent on the location of the enterprises, which had already been determined, and not vice versa (p. 457). Hitler's decision to entrust Himmler with control of settlement policy in October 1939 constituted "in the following years the most important reason for the acquisition of countless economic concerns" (p. 464). Furthermore, the symbolic value of this policy area was so high that the SS portrayed many of its economic activities as though they directly and significantly related to settlement policy, even when this was not the case (p. 464). It was Himmler, and not one of his subordinates, who was the driving force behind SS expansion in the production of mineral water, an area in which few would have expected the SS to be interested. Himmler's involvement in the drinks industry was justified by Oswald Pohl, who cited Himmler's struggle, as Chief of the German Police, against alcohol abuse and the unwillingness of private firms to equalize the prices of alcohol and non-alcoholic beverages (p. 465). By late 1943, the SS supplied around three-quarters of the German mineral water market (p. 476).

The attainment of dominant, monopoly-like positions in the mineral water industry and in publishing, where

the Nordland-Verlag, acquired by the SS at the end of 1934, became the third largest German publishing house, was, however, an exception (p. 1,087). In fact, the SS embarked on many economic ventures that must be considered outright failures. In the annexed Slovenian territories, for example, it proved impossible for the SS to exert control over building materials concerns located there, due to the ongoing and decisive influence of the local Gauleiter (pp. 564-582). The same applies to unilateral attempts to take over economic concerns in the occupied Soviet territories following the invasion of June 1941, in spite of the appointment of the Chief of the Reich Security Main Office, Reinhard Heydrich,[2] as liaison officer to the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (pp. 582-588, 1,037). Despite having constructed the buildings, SS efforts at the beginning of 1942 to bring armaments concerns under their control failed due to stiff opposition within private industry (pp. 498-500). These examples demonstrate that the SS was in economic terms "powerful, but not all-powerful" (pp. 219, 234).

Throughout the 1930s, the SS was in the enviable position of not being obliged to pay anything for the benefit of having a labor reservoir at its disposal in the form of many tens, and later hundreds of thousands of concentration camp inmates, because the concentration camps were financed out of public funds (p. 99). In June 1940, protests had grown sufficiently vocal for Pohl to make the symbolic payment of 30 pfennig per inmate per working day to the Reich Finance Ministry (p. 421). This token amount did not alter the fact that the SS could supply very large numbers of laborers at a far cheaper price than any other economic organization. Until the second half of 1942, it had been almost exclusively the SS that had benefited from the work of these prisoners, but the objections of private industry to the perquisites enjoyed by the SS and shortages in the war economy made it increasingly difficult for the SS to retain the prisoners for its own purposes. As a result, from 1943 onwards the majority of concentration camp inmates were recruited to work in various areas of the war economy (pp. 1,010, 1,063). Due to their treatment and the terrible conditions in which they were forced to work, the performance of the prisoners compared for the most part very unfavorably with that of voluntary workers (pp. 672, 1,062-1,063). This result was offset by the deployment of massive numbers of prisoners. In the case of the German Armaments Works PLC (Deutsche Ausrüstungswerke GmbH, DAW), the largest of all the SS concerns, the substantial rise in profits experienced between 1940 and 1944 corresponded to the rise in the number of prisoners employed by them (p.

935).

One issue that occupies Kaienburg a great deal is how the SS leadership sought to reconcile, in the treatment of concentration camp prisoners, the political aim of repression and annihilation on the one hand and economic gain on the other. He concludes that terror, the political aim, always retained priority in the concentration camp system (pp. 249, 704). That the exercise of terror received priority over productivity considerations is hardly surprising, given that the primacy of politics over economics was a central factor in National Socialist thinking. This approach prevailed not only in the treatment of prisoners. As political reliability counted for more than professional expertise in the appointment of personnel to important positions in economic concerns, management errors were made repeatedly, some of which were grave (pp. 245, 351, 823, 1,043). In spite of the “invaluable economic potential” it had at its disposal in the form of forced labor (p. 1,091), the SS economic organization ultimately proved to be “too inefficient” (p. 1,096) and never became an important factor in the German war economy (p. 1,088). Even with regard to the long-held aim of achieving autarky in the supplying of its own organizations in order to consolidate its political freedom of action, the SS never came close (pp. 1,088-1,090).

Readers are advised not to follow the example of this reviewer and read the book from cover to cover, but

rather to treat it as a reference work. In this capacity, the book’s foremost asset, namely its scope and exhaustive detail, is of greatest benefit. On occasion, however, the length and density of the study obscure the very pertinent questions the author has set himself. This problem is particularly apparent, for example, in the sub-chapter on the German Earth and Stone Works PLC (Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH, DEST), which covers almost 170 pages. Analysis takes a back seat to the flood of dates, figures and other particulars and is limited to a handful of pages at the end of the section. All in all, Kaienburg’s tome constitutes both a laudable achievement and a valuable and welcome addition not only to scholarship on the activities of the SS, but also on National Socialist economic thinking and practice. The volume also contains appendices and an extensive index helpfully broken down according to person, place and institution.

#### Notes

[1]. Jan Erik Schulte, *Zwangsarbeit und Vernichtung. Das Wirtschaftsimperium der SS. Oswald Pohl und das SS-Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt 1933-1945* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2001). Schulte’s work does, however, feature in the selected literature listed at the back of Kaienburg’s book.

[2]. Kaienburg incorrectly refers to Heydrich as “Gestapocheff Heydrich” (p. 802, n. 128). Heinrich Müller was Chief of the Gestapo.

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