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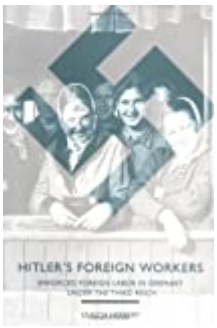

Ulrich Herbert. *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany under the Third Reich.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 510pp.p. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-47000-1.

Reviewed by Milton Goldin

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (March, 2000)

U. Herbert: Hitler's Foreign Workers

Forced Labor as a War Aim

I first read this book in its German version, "Fremdarbeiter: Politik und Praxis des 'AuslÃ¤nder-Einsatzes' in der Kriegwirtschaft des Dritten Reiches" (1985), because I was curious what a historian named Ulrich Herbert, whose work I did not then know, might have to say that two historians, whose work on the subject of foreign workers I did know, had not said. Edward L. Homze had published "Labor in Nazi Germany", in 1967, and Alan S. Milward had published "The German Economy at War, 1939-1945", in 1965. In "Fremdarbeiter", I discovered a book whose author persuasively argues that the National Socialist regime could pursue its war aims only by sending German workers to die in Poland, Belgium, France, Holland, Russia, and Italy, and replacing them with workers from Poland, Belgium, France, Holland, Russia, and Italy. "Fremdarbeiter" further reminds us of the utter confusion and comic-opera management that characterized Nazi economic policy, to an even greater extent than do either of the other books.

"Fremdarbeiter" attracted relatively little attention in America, even in scholarly circles. This was unfortunate; although several of the topics addressed in the book (among them, economic policy as related to foreign workers, German morale, and Goebbels's "Total War") have been subjects for hundreds of articles and books, the candor with which they have been examined is not as noticeable as it is here. For example, Herbert's treatment of how Germans felt about foreign workers at various points during the conflict, how the regime felt about how Germans felt, how the regime deceived German workers along with forced laborers, how foreigners felt about working for the Nazi cause, and how foreign workers fit into the Nazi economy before and after Stalingrad, which Herbert sees as the great turning point of the war suggests that the population and the regime took equal roles making inhuman treatment worse.

By now, of course, it is a truism among historians that Berlin went to war prepared only to fight opponents unprepared for war. Not much more need be said about this except that Germans learned World War I's military lessons and still lost, whereas Anglo-Americans and Russians ignored the lessons and still won. Indeed, it is astonishing that Germany lost. Berlin had everything in its

favor except brute numbers, and it was arguably strong enough to have offset even this considerable disadvantage in the long term had its economic policies been rational.

In this translation (which has only a few revisions from the German version), Herbert describes economic policy – and particularly labor policy – as a kind of dollop of Karl May mixed with servings of Marx Brothers movies. Hitler's policy was never to fire a senior alte Kaempfer or to dismantle an agency that was no longer of use. This meant that some 42 national agencies eventually competed with each other. None could be certain that Hitler knew that it still existed, unless Hitler happened to summon its chief. Hitler alternately ignored his economic chiefs (including Fritz Sauckel, the plenipotentiary for the mobilization of labor), demanded better results from them, and had temper tantrums when facts did not suit him.

Herbert tells us that Germans enjoyed several inspirational high points in advance of Stalingrad during which the population would demonstrate that it had as great a capacity for wishful thinking as did Hitler. Victory over France, in the late spring of 1940, put Germans "into a prolonged and triumphant euphoria"(p. 106), given that they confidently expected the British to quickly surrender and for most of the Wehrmacht to return home. Neither happened, but British and French POWs were put to work, along with two million non-Germans who willingly agreed to employment in the Reich, to make up for men in the armed forces. By October, and despite the influx, the Wirtschafts-und Ruestungsamt cautioned Hermann Goering that industry urgently required an additional 800,000 workers. Alert officials began to suspect that "fremdarbeiter" might be part of the labor force for a long time to come.

Both the regime and the citizenry had mixed reactions to this situation. On the one hand, security risks from French POWs (who comprised the bulk of prisoners, before masses of Slav POWs and then civilians arrived) were negligible, a fortunate development because the Wehrmacht did not have sufficient manpower to provide armed guards. On the other hand, racists, already tormented by suspicions that Poles were fathering illegitimate children while German males were at the front, now suspected that French POWs might seek sexual relations with German females.

Again, in the fall of 1941, with victory after victory in Russia, a belief spread that the conflict must soon be over. Wehrmacht troops could return to peacetime occupations, and the granaries of the Ukraine would provision central Europe instead of the northern Soviet Union. But by October 1941, another 800,000 workers were urgently needed, and by November 19, OKW stated that 49 divisions originally scheduled to return home must remain where they were.

The first three million Red Army soldiers taken prisoner had starved to death, because no one had thought in advance how to care for that many POWs, because of a deep-rooted Russophobia among both Nazis and the population, and because if the war ended, foreign workers would not be necessary. By November, however, a green light had to be given for the large-scale deployment of workers from Russia, many of them to be children seized in schools. On the bright side, it was hoped that Russian contacts with Germans no matter how fleeting might endow Slavs with minimal grace. Hitler also thought that blond Ukrainians must be the offspring of Germans who had wandered East, so there was some hope, however minimal, for their salvation.

What does Herbert conclude from this history? "To see the labor deployment of millions of foreign workers in Nazi Germany during World War II as a structural feature (or even a static "functional element") of German fascism is to fail to comprehend its importance...."(p. 382) Which may even be an understatement. Herbert also tells us that just as the deployment of forced laborers was no product of planning, it was not "even the expression of the 'fundamental theses of Nazism' (Milward)," (p. 384) Which may also be an understatement. The theses were that the creation and maintenance of states of hysteria, terror, and utter contempt for anyone considered weaker could be induced in a population. National Socialists came very near proving that these objectives could not only be achieved but could become permanent features of German life.

Citation: Milton Goldin. Review of Herbert, Ulrich, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany*

under the Third Reich. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

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