

Antonella Tiburzi

Teaching the History of Forced Labour

Materials and Sources





Fig. 1: Soviet forced labourers in Linz /
Lentia
Publishing, Linz

Fig. 2: Drawing 'In the Tunnel' by
former
concentration camp prisoner Jean Bernard
Aldebert
/ **Archive of the Mauthausen Memorial**

Introduction

Teaching units on the history of "forced labour" during the National Socialist era are of great importance for both learners and educators to understand an event that affected over 20 million people. As a teaching and learning method, we propose a direct, active, and engaging approach of learning-by-doing. This type of learning process involves not only the transmission of knowledge by educators and the acquisition of historical knowledge by learners but also offers learners the opportunity to develop their own educational tools. These tools can serve both to reinforce their own understanding and to be used in future projects after completing their education, either at their own schools or elsewhere. Examples of such tools include project reports or the creation of various cultural products (e-books, PowerPoint presentations, infographics, etc.).

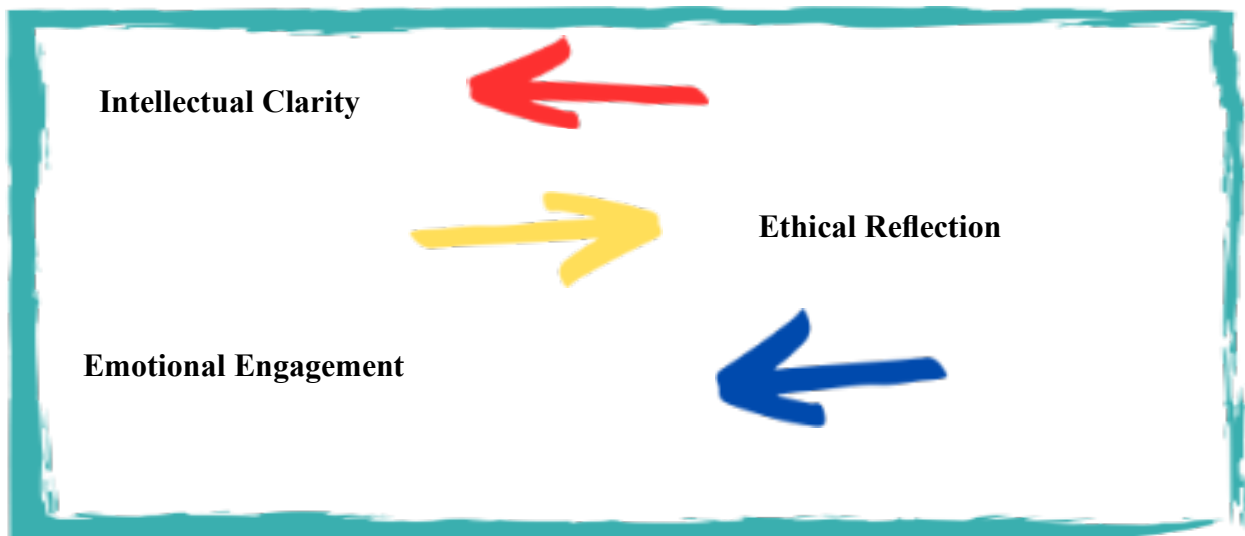
After developing skills in research, acquisition, and deepening of knowledge, as well as tools, the class will have achieved necessary competences they can apply to further topics and learning units. These resources can also prove valuable in school inclusion projects.

The projects, developed with the help of digital formats, can first be presented within the class, then to the school, and finally to a broader audience. They can be published and made visible on major search engines, inspiring other schools at home and abroad to develop their own projects. In this way, the class becomes part of a European community of students striving to achieve common goals.

Pedagogical Principles

1. **Embedding in Historical Context:** Every event must be presented within its historical context. Who did what, when, where, and how?
2. **Using Original Sources and Eyewitness Accounts:** Students should have access to (digital) original documents from victims, perpetrators, collaborators, and bystanders. The key elements of each document should be identified, and students should also learn to interpret sources. Who said what, when, where, how, and why?
3. **Recognizing and Analysing Racism, Antisemitism, and Xenophobia:** Students should learn about the experiences of people who were victims of persecution under National Socialism, fascism, or other authoritarian regimes.
4. **Developing Critical Thinking:** Students should be given opportunities to ask questions—of themselves and others—and exchange ideas. What does the past have to do with the present and with me?
5. **Fostering Empathy for Victims and the Persecuted:** Students should understand the stories of men, women, and children—their actions, inaction, and the consequences of their decisions. Why did someone do what they did in the past, and what were the effects—for themselves and others? Superfluous or misleading information should be avoided.
6. **Building a Sense of Community:** Through an in-depth engagement with a topic, students and educators should develop and strengthen a sense of community and social responsibility. Past events should be connected to present-day issues ("history hook").

General Pedagogical Rules



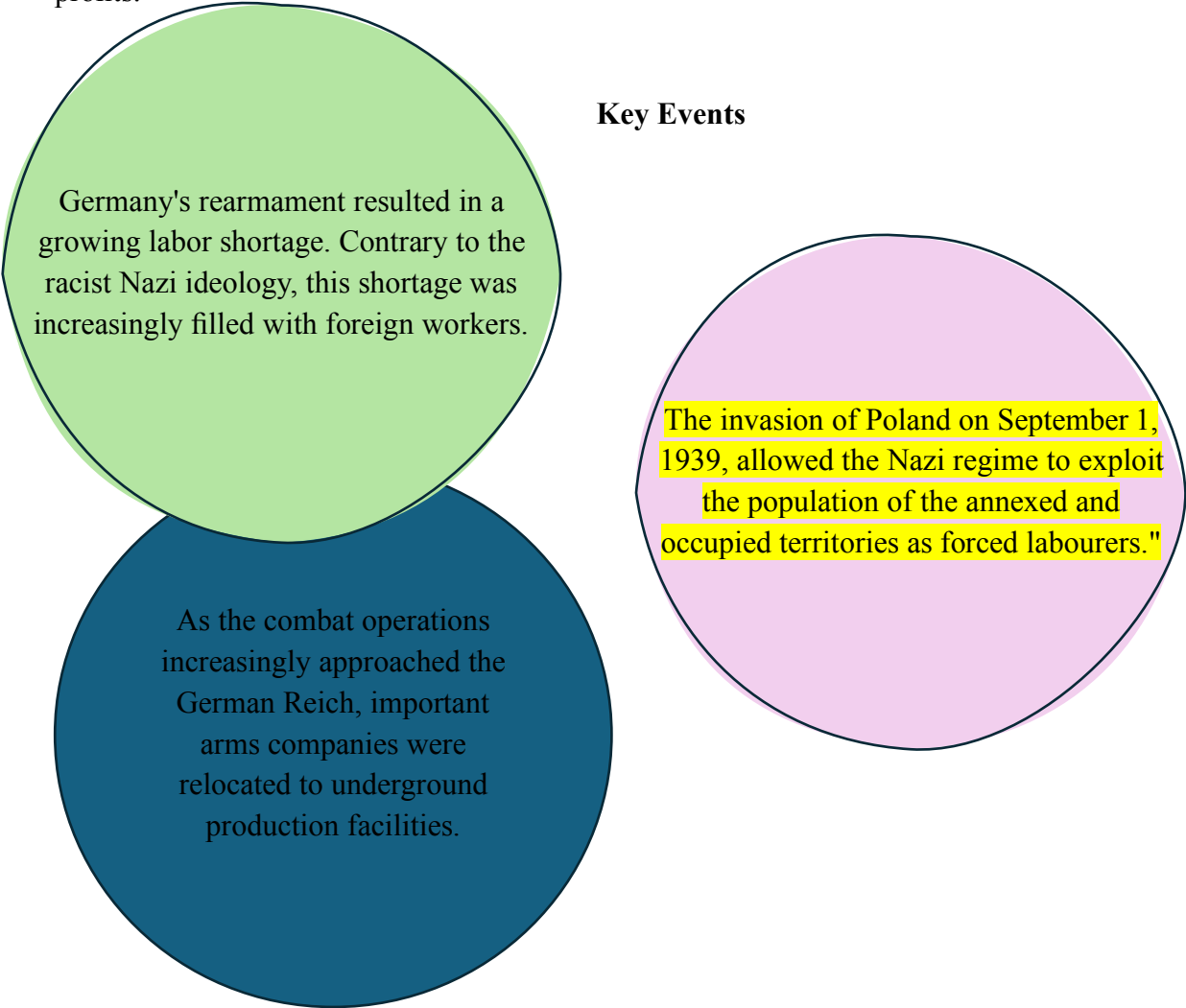
Forced Labourers in Nazi Concentration Camps

For the Nazi economy, the use of forced labour by foreign workers and political opponents was of crucial importance. The German Wehrmacht, the Schutzstaffel (SS), civilian and police authorities, industrial enterprises, tradespeople, and farmers all utilized various categories of forced labourers for their economic and war efforts. Many forced labourers died because of abuse, inhumane working conditions, diseases, and inadequate nutrition.

With the establishment of the first concentration camps and detention facilities in the winter of 1933, forced labour became a fundamental element of national socialist policy. Political opponents were interned in concentration or labour camps and were often compelled to perform pointless and degrading tasks without proper equipment, clothing, food, or rest.

The exploitation of forced labourers started already before the beginning of World War II – within and outside the concentration camps. From 1937 onward, the forced labour of so-called "enemies of the state" increasingly served the Nazi regime to address labour shortages and maximize economic profits.

Key Events



Germany's rearmament resulted in a growing labor shortage. Contrary to the racist Nazi ideology, this shortage was increasingly filled with foreign workers.

As the combat operations increasingly approached the German Reich, important arms companies were relocated to underground production facilities.

The invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, allowed the Nazi regime to exploit the population of the annexed and occupied territories as forced labourers."

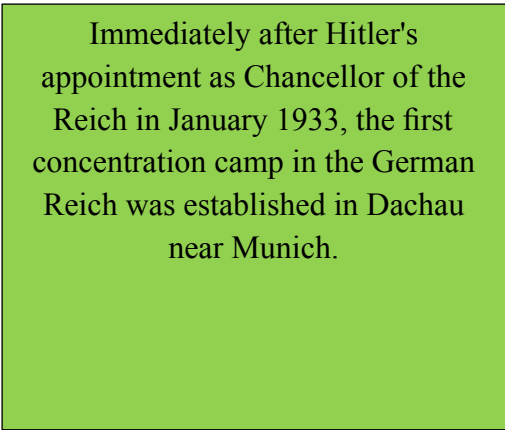
Political opponents

After World War I (1914-1918), nationalist political movements in Germany and Austria tended to view the German nation collectively as a people's community.

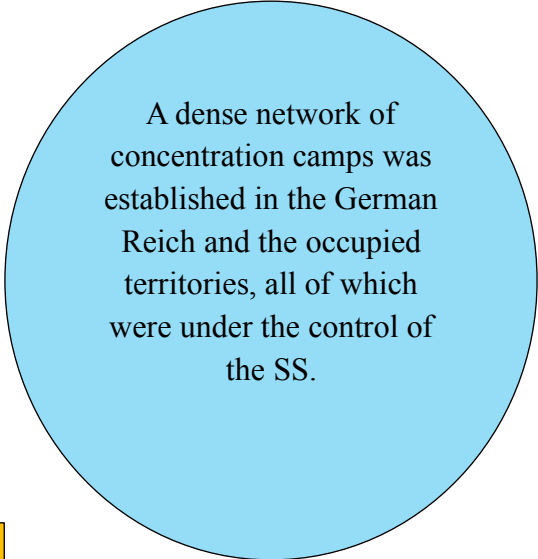
According to the Nazi ideologists all Germans should accept the premises of the National Socialist worldview and shape their lives accordingly. They did not tolerate criticism, disagreement, or deviation. Political opponents were the first victims of systematic persecution in the form of *Gleichschaltung* (forced conformity).

The Nazis persecuted political opponents with the goal of making them accept and internalize the National Socialist worldview. Dissidents who opposed the implementation of racist thinking and actions were dealt harshly. Internment and forced labour in a concentration camp were initially intended to "educate" Germans - and Austrians – to accept the values of National Socialism.

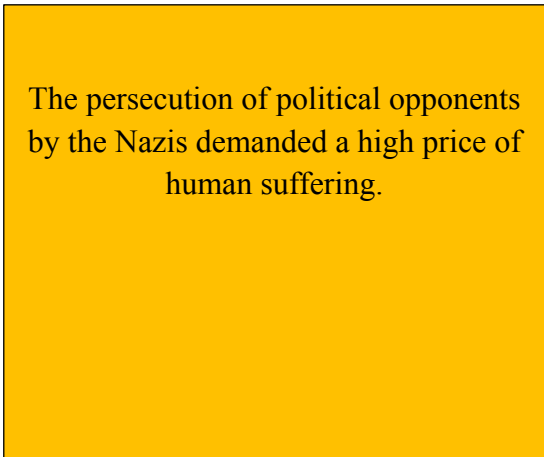
Key events



Immediately after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of the Reich in January 1933, the first concentration camp in the German Reich was established in Dachau near Munich.



A dense network of concentration camps was established in the German Reich and the occupied territories, all of which were under the control of the SS.



The persecution of political opponents by the Nazis demanded a high price of human suffering.

Civil forced labourers from Poland

Immediately after the invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II on September 1, 1939, Nazi labour offices and German industrial companies began recruiting labour. Workers were recruited, assigned to the Reich by local labour offices, or forced into labour through threats or raids.

In the German Reich, Polish workers were immediately subjected to special laws, the so-called *Polenerlasse* (Polish decrees). These laws deprived them of all rights: they were not allowed to leave their workplaces, received little to no pay, and were forbidden from visiting inns, churches, or using public transport or bicycles. They also had to wear a visible identifying mark with the letter "P" on their clothing. This made them the first group in the Reich to be visibly recognized as a discriminated group—before the so-called Jewish badge was introduced in September 1941.

The national socialist police forces paid special attention to enforcing the so-called "forbidden contact" rule: Poles— as well as prisoners of war and later Soviet forced labourers—were not allowed to have contact with locals beyond what was necessary for work-related communication. Forbidden sexual relations with Germans had severe consequences for Polish and Soviet men: they were publicly hanged at their work sites, and all other Polish forced labourers were forced to witness the execution.

Key events

Introduction of the so-called "Polish decrees" on March 8th 1940 and of the so-called "Eastern workers decrees" on February 20th 1942

Fritz Sauckel, as General Plenipotentiary for Labour Deployment, was responsible for the recruitment of forced laborers starting in 1942.

Defeat of the 6th Army of the German Wehrmacht at Stalingrad in the winter of 1942/1943.

Italian military internees (IMI)

On September 8, 1943, Italian Prime Minister Pietro Badoglio announced an armistice with the United States, Great Britain, and France. The alliance with Nazi Germany was thereby terminated.

Italian troops were stationed in the areas occupied by Italy in southern France, the Balkans, and Greece. The Italian king and government as well as military officials fled Rome, leaving the army without orders. Although outnumbered, the German Wehrmacht succeeded in disarming and capturing around 600,000 Italian soldiers in the occupied zones. Only a few units resisted.

The men were deported to Germany, Austria, and the territories occupied by Nazi Germany. A special status was created for them, that of the Italian Military Internees (IMI). Due to this special status, they were not recognized as prisoners of war and were therefore not protected by international agreements. They were forced into labour, including in the armaments industry. Approximately 50,000 people died due to the conditions of captivity or were murdered.

Key events

The special status as IMI prevented assistance from the International Red Cross.

Nazi propaganda presented the change in status from IMI to worker as a form of liberation, thus concealing the exploitation as forced labour.

After the agreements between Hitler and Mussolini in the summer of 1944, the situation did not change much. Hunger, cold, and abuse were part of the daily life of the IMI.

Teaching activities. Tools for learning, understanding, and reflection.

Studying National Socialism, the concentration camp system, and the specific situations in Austria, Poland, and Italy confront both educators and learners with historical and moral aspects. Such a learning process takes time. Therefore, it is crucial that students are given the opportunity to understand the perspectives of the actors, develop awareness, engage in dialogue about their own experiences, and expand their thoughts and opinions.

Active participation in a project like the one presented here can be a relevant part of this learning process, especially when it is conducted with proper preparation and follow-up.

The teaching activities introduced below can prepare learning groups to understand the exhibition *Forced to Work – Willing to Survive*, which presents both the broad dimensions of the history of forced labour through statistical data and biographies of individual men, women and children whose labour was exploited in various locations in Austria and other territories that were part of the Reich at the time.



Fig. 3: Europe in April 1944 / from: *Germany and the Second World War*, edited by the Research Institute for Military History, Potsdam, Germany. Volume V, *Organization and Mobilization of the German Sphere of Power, Part 2, Wartime Administration, Economy, and Manpower Resources 1942-1944/45*, by Bernhard R. Kroener, Rolf-Dieter Müller, and Hans Umbreit. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1998.

The following teaching activities focus on biographies to illustrate the historical context of the National Socialist era, as well as the different categories of forced labourers and how they experienced the events of macro-history. The additional reflections developed through this can help students establish known historical connections (history hook), meaning connections rather than parallels, between the past and the present.

History / Stories / Timelines / Infographics

In the stories of the surviving forced labourers, **historical events, places, and dates** are intertwined. After carefully reading or listening to the biographies of the individuals, a timeline should be developed that represents the connection between Nazi policies, the course of World War II, local historical events, and personal experiences in multiple layers. This is intended to encourage critical thinking.



Fig. 4: A young forced labourer / **Extract from the film Sorstalanság (“Fateless - The Novel of a Fate-less Man” / “Senza destino”) by Lajos Koltai, 2005.** The film is based on the Autobiography of Imre Kertesz.

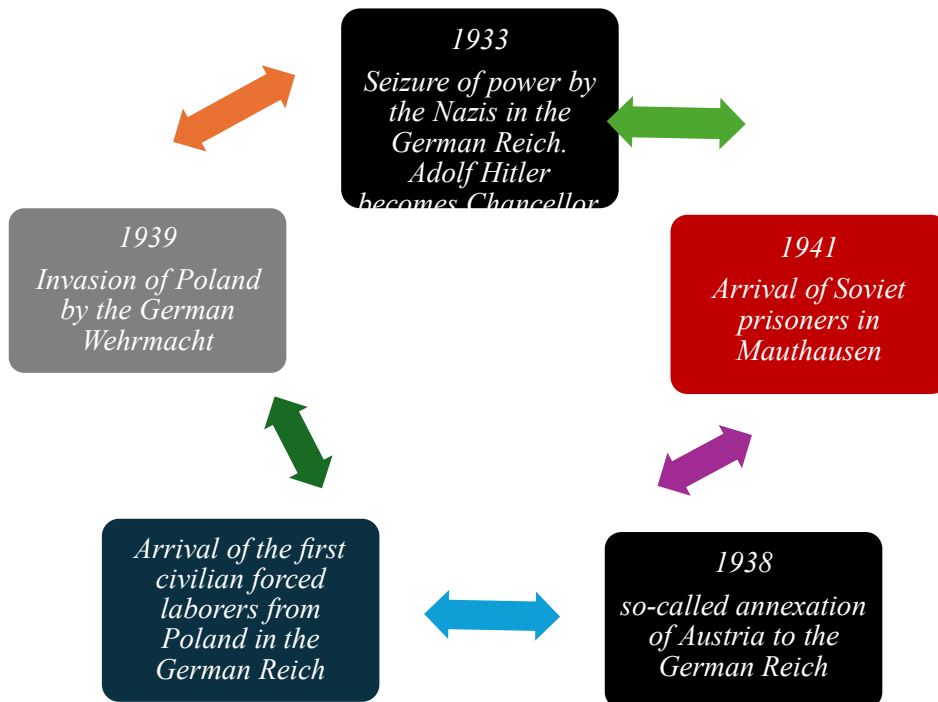
Fig. 5: June 6th, 1944. Soldiers prepare for landing at Omaha Beach in **Normandy** / **Conseil Régional de Basse-Normandie** / **National Archives USA**



Fig. 6: Ravensbrück / **Photo from Antonella Tiburzi**

It is recommended, to take photos when visiting a memorial site (no selfies).

Example with some key dates



1922 Seizure of power by Benito Mussolini and the Fascist Party

1933 Seizure of power by the Nationals Socialists in the German Reich. Adolf Hitler becomes Chancellor

1938 Annexation of Austria to the German Reich

1939 Invasion of Poland by the German Wehrmacht. Beginning of recruitment of civilians and prisoners of war for forced labour

1940 War against France and Belgium. Beginning of the recruitment of western European men and women for forced labour

1941 Beginning of the deportation of people from the Soviet Union to the German labour and concentration camps

- [Link](#) for the Download of the digital timeline. Additional data can be filled in.
- It is recommended to consider also events from the lives and the memories of former forced labourers.

Through **chronological panels**, the learners should be able to place historical events into context and draw their own conclusions.

- **Exercise:** The learners lay out sheets with the years (or pin them to the wall), and then add additional sheets or Post-it with **key events** corresponding to those years. With this, students shall be encouraged to make connections to historical events. ([Link to download](#))

1922

1933

1938

1939

1941

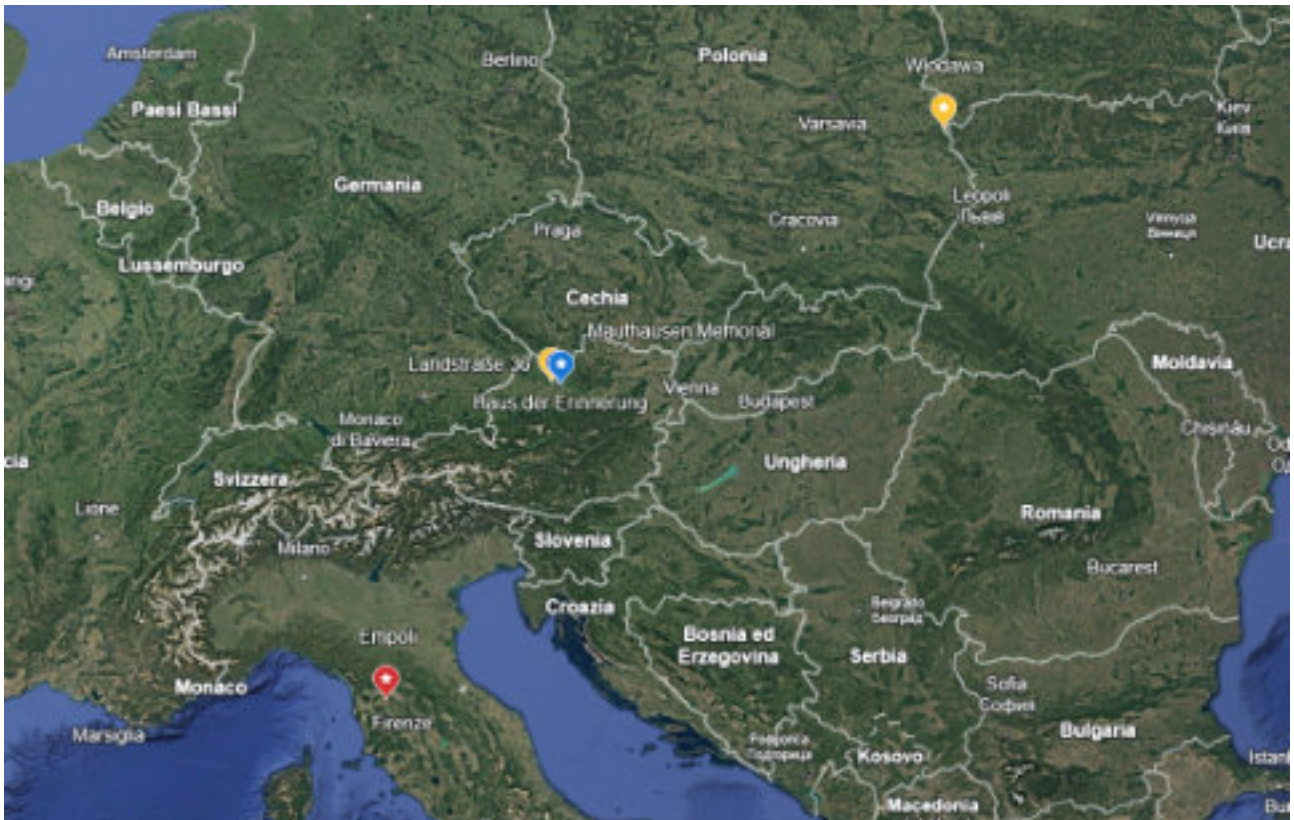
1943

1944

1945

The Key Locations in the History of Forced Labour

- The map shows the key locations of the project“ *Forced to work – Willing to Survive*”.

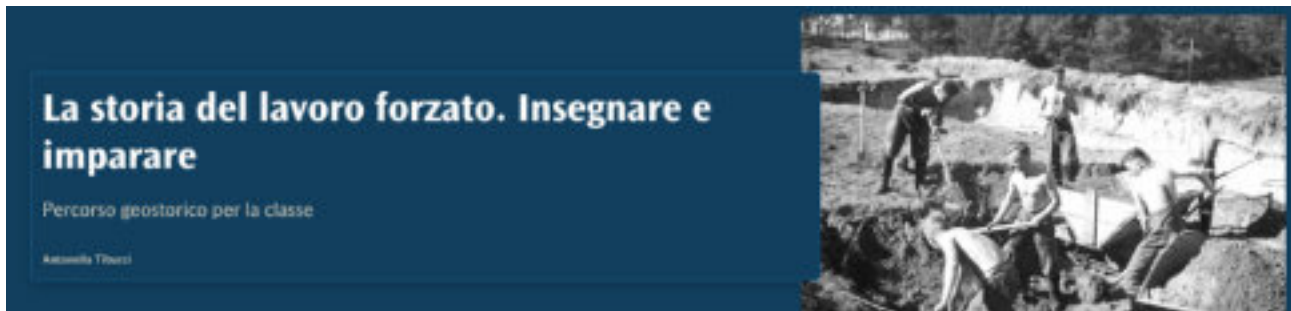


• **Exercise:** After the learners have become more familiar with a biography/story, the locations of detention/internment for forced labour will be marked.

- After studying the Google Earth map additional **information** shall be allocated and the (digital) map shall be completed with further **aspects, photos and questions**.
- **Link:** The key locations in the history of forced labour.

Resources for download and research:

ArcGisStoryMap. The digital Handbook on the History of Forced Labour „*La storia del lavoro forzato. Insegnare e imparare*“ gives useful information. The students can adapt it for researching the history of a person or a region.



National Archive Records Administration (NARA): A digital Research tool made by the national Archive of the United States of America for the main national socialist concentration and extermination camps. Link: https://www.archives.gov/research/holocaust/concentration-camps?_ga=2.38895843.1543218822.1734605816-931897520.1733827773#otherCamps

List of places of detention: On the homepage of the German national archive, a research tool offers the possibility to investigate all camps in the German Reich and the occupied territories, in which forced labourers were imprisoned. (in German) Link: <https://www.bundesarchiv.de/zwangsarbeit/haftstaetten/index.php?tab=3>

Arolsen Archives – International Center on Nazi Persecution: The *International Tracing Service* (ITS) was founded as an organization dedicated to finding missing persons, typically lost to family and friends as a result of war, persecution or forced labour during World War II. More than 17.5 million former forced labourers, displaced persons and murdered could be traced. Link for Search the Online Archive: <https://arolsen-archives.org/en/search-explore/search-online-archive/>

Hall of Names (Yad Vashem): Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust offers a central database of Shoah victims' names. Link: <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/names>

Raum der Namen / Raum der Namen: A digital book of remembrance of the murdered people in the concentration camp Mauthausen and its sub camps (in German). Link: <https://raumdernamen.mauthausen-memorial.org/>

Tools for terms, names, and places

Knowledge of a sufficient number of precise terms, which refer both to history in general, the history of forced labour, or the individual history of the people involved, is crucial for better understanding any text in and outside of the classroom. It is strongly recommended to be familiar with the terms, even if they are written in another language, and then provide corresponding explanations.



As a helpful resource, we have created a glossary on our website for the key terms related to Nazi forced labour: www.bewusstseinsregion.at

Further helpful information can be found at:

E-Book: Antonella Tiburzi, *Insegnare la storia del lavoro Forzato. Dall'Italia al Terzo Reich*, Centro Studi EduShoah, 2023. (in Italian)



Educational toolkit: Antonella Tiburzi, *Chi erano le vittime del Nazionalsocialismo*, EuroClio2023. (in Italian with English references)



The language of Nazi propaganda

While students examine the chronology of events that led to World War II, the exploitation of millions of workers, and the murder of thousands of men, women, and children, reflecting on the role of Nazi propaganda in carrying out these crimes against humanity and its acceptance by the population is important. It is recommended to pay attention to the fundamental principles of Nazi propaganda to understand why the genocide of the Jewish population, political opponents, Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other 'undesirables' took place. This should also prompt reflection on why the aggressive war by Nazi Germany received such strong support and so little resistance from the German and Austrian populations. The key elements of Nazi propaganda were:

1. To overcome the humiliating Treaty of Versailles from 1919.

Fig. 6: Nazi propaganda brochure: A Struggle for the General

2. To highlight the weakness of the parliamentary Weimar Republic.

3. To demonize the internationalism of "world Jewry," which in this view stands in contrast to patriotic German nationalism.

4. To glorify the leader, Adolf Hitler, and present him as infallible.

5. To dehumanize political and racial opponents to justify their internment, discrimination, or murder.

6. To present the National Socialist movement as a mass movement in order to create consensus.



• **Exercise:** The teachers should select a Nazi propaganda poster and, together with the students, discuss how the Nazi regime or the National Socialist Party used images, content, and messages to achieve their goal.

Propaganda for working in the German Reich

“Arruolatevi” (Sign up!). A military term is used in a civilian context.

The Nazi symbol behind the couple is meant to give the call more significance and weight.



“Germany will protect you” is meant to serve as reassurance for the fascist allies.

Fig. 7: Recruitment poster for civilian labour from Italy, Istituto Storico Toscano della Resistenza e dell'Età contemporanea, Fondo Roberto Caspoli

Working with photographs



Photo from Ebensee, May 1945

Fig. 8: Survivors of the concentration camp in Ebensee after their liberation / NARA, Photo by Lt. Arnold E. Samuelson

• **Exercise:** This photo taken by the American liberators in Ebensee, Upper Austria, shows the survivors of the Ebensee concentration camp in May 1945.

- Name the details
- Research their stories
- Look at their eyes
- Look at their faces
- Examine their clothing
- Why are they not wearing shoes?



The same photo colorized by photographer Tom Marshal, 2020.

Fig. 9: Tom Marshall, <https://www.photografix.com/post/2020/01/27/the-horror-of-the-holocaust-in-colour>

- Why did the photographer colorize the photo?
- How does the colorized photo affect you?



Questions for the students

After carefully analysing the exhibition panels, the students should answer the following questions individually or in groups of 3-4. Of course, both teachers and students are encouraged to develop their own questions on the topic of exploitation through forced labour.

Questions	Answers
1. <i>Who profited from the system of forced labour?</i>	
2. <i>In what way does the spread of labour camps demonstrate the systematic nature of the Nazi administration and its treatment of forced labourers?</i>	
3. <i>Were the German population and the citizens of the occupied countries aware of the existence of the camps?</i>	
4. <i>To what degree are the other countries responsible for the deportation of their fellow citizens?</i>	
5. ...	
6. ...	

Reflect on the past.



How should a discussion be conducted in the classroom?

An essential starting point is asking good questions. A respectful and effective teaching style should promote a learning process that is based on research. This works best when students are encouraged to develop their own questions and align their learning process accordingly. Here are some tips:

1. **Ensure a good learning atmosphere.** Follow the method of "safety inside and outside the classroom." When dealing with the horrors of National Socialism, students must feel comfortable to ask their own questions and engage deeply with the topic.
2. **Develop good questions.** Integrate and encourage good questions in the classroom. If no questions come from students at the beginning of the lesson, teachers should have them prepared. Good questions build on prior knowledge, expand perspectives, and challenge students to think critically.
3. **Ask clarifying questions.** We want students to do more than remember or understand a concept. We want them to develop critical thinking. Therefore, teachers should offer students the opportunity to express their opinions and thoughts in order to learn together.
4. **Embrace silence.** Silence can be uncomfortable, especially for students who are constantly surrounded by media, noise and distractions. If we want students to critically engage with their environment, we must give them time to do so. Silence means that students are reflecting. That is the purpose of our questions.



Fig. 10: Burgenland Roma who were forced to work on road construction in Triebendorf starting in 1939 / **Collection Erich Schreilechner**

In the following table, the advices given above are listed.
Write the reactions of your learning group in the second column.

1.	Safety inside and outside the classroom	
2.	Develop good questions	
3.	Ask clarifying questions	
4.	Embrace silence	



Personal notes

Finally, the students should reflect independently on what they have learned. They should note their thoughts, feelings, what they have learned, and their critical comments.

(Still) open questions

When addressing the topic of forced labour in the classroom or at school, several questions must be considered.

®Setting boundaries

- What are the challenges in teaching about Nazi forced labour?
- How can current forms of exploitation and forced labour be taught?
- How can difficulties in the classroom be addressed to bring this topic closer to students?
- How can the current generation be reached?

®Learning from the past

- What is the significance of the topic of forced labour in our society today?
- How can we interact with the companies involved? Include them in your project!
- How can the issue of responsibility for collaborators, bystanders, and resistant actors during the Nazi era be applied to current cases of human rights violations?

®Methodology

- How can a multidisciplinary approach to the topic of forced labour be combined in research, a lesson plan, or an educational project?

What can be the results of the class work?

- **General results:** Presentation, exercises, games (Gamification)
 - **Book Creator:** one or more books per student, one or more books per class, publication and (also) sale of the books.
 - **ArcGisStoryMap:** the history of an individual victim, the history of a place, the history of an event.
 - **Illustration:** educational posters, lectures photo album and collection of documents.

Why should results be organised?

- to stimulate students' creativity and for active learning
- due to the methodology "Learning by doing"
- to inspire other students, classes, social groups
- to share common projects

- **Reflection:** It is highly recommended to read carefully the quote of **Max Mannheimer** (1920-2016), a survivor of the concentration camps Auschwitz-Birkenau and Dachau, and to think about it alone or together with the classmates.

“You are not guilty about what happened in the past, but you are responsible, that it never happens again”

- Print the quote of Max Mannheimer and pin it to the wall in the classroom, the school library or education centre. ([Link](#))

Comments and Suggestions

- When research is being conducted, understanding is being created and a project is realised, insecurities and difficulties can be encountered. However, there might also be plenty of moments of satisfaction, creativity and inspiration. All these feelings contribute to the realisation and success of every project.
- So please do not hesitate to contact the people listed below if you have any questions or problems. Together we will find a solution for every need. We would also be pleased to hear about your successful projects.
- See you ... Good work!

Questions and comments to:

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