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Forced Labour in the Past and the Present. Examples from Austria, Italy and Poland.

Content Development of the Exhibition:

Francesca Cavarocchi, Mariusz Czuj, Claudia Heimes, Anita Lewczuk vel Leoniuk, Paola Matteucci, Andrea Molesti, Marcin Mitkowski, Lucia Pergreffi, Sabine Schweitzer, Andrea Wahl, Antonella Tiburzi (Educational Guide), Giada Kogovsek (Brochure)

Graphic Design:

Erwin Krinninger and Sarah Rachinger (Online Advertising Agency)

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Audio Narration:

Staff of Freies Radio Freistadt

Lenders:

Amicale Mauthausen, Associazione Nazionale Ex Deportati nei Campi Nazisti (ANED), Documentation Center of Austrian Resistance (DÖW), German Federal Archives (BArch), Deutsch-Tschechischer Zukunftsfonds Prague (DTZF), Fundacja „Polsko-Niemieckie Pojednanie“ / Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation Warsaw (FPNP), FDR Presidential Library & Museum, International Labour Organization Geneva (ILO), Istituto Storico Toscano della Resistenza e dell’Età contemporanea, Kreisarchiv Unna, Mauthausen Memorial, Lentia-Verlag Linz, Musée de Bretagne Rennes, Museu d’Història de Catalunya (MHC), Museum and Memorial in Sobibór, Museum of the Synagogue Włodawa, National Archives Washington (NARA), National Library Vienna (NB), Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe / National Polish Digital Archive, Lower Austrian State Archive (NÖLA), Upper Austrian State Archive (OÖLA), Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (PMO), Private Archive Johannes Breit, Private Collections of the Arrostiti, Bardini, Baldacci, Brandstätter, Castellani, Di Giusto, Frizzi, Nencioni, Pergreffi, Rugiadi, Rovai, Taddei, and Zalewski Families, Rudolf A. Haunschmied Collection, Ela Hornung / Ernst Langthaler / Sabine Schweitzer Collection, Arnold R. Kräuter Collection, Erich Schreilechner Collection, Association „Gate of Memory Włodawa – Sobibór,“ Superbass, Trafikoteka, Voestalpine Archive Linz, Voestalpine Contemporary History Museum Linz, Vienna City and State Archive (WStLA), United Nations (UN), Yad Vashem

Cover Image 1: Burgenland Roma were forced publicly to perform forced labour for railway construction in Hinterberg near Leoben, 1939/1940

/ Collection A. Kräuter, Leoben

Cover Image 2: A Czech civilian labourer **/ DTZF Archive Prague**

Cover Image 3: Polish civilian workers in the Reich were subjected to obligations but granted no rights whatsoever **/ NÖLA**

CONTENT

About the Exhibition	4
Structure of the Exhibition	4
Using the Exhibition	4
Gender Diversity and Inclusive Language	5
The Term „Forced Labour“	6
Categories of Forced Labour in the Nazi System	6
Forced Labour in Annexed Austria	8
Italian Forced Labourers	10
Forced Labour and Extermination in Occupied Poland	12
International Agreements	14
The present Situation: “Modern Slavery”	15



East European Female Forced Labourers in Linz
/ Lentia Publishing House Linz



www.bewusstseinsregion.at

About the Exhibition

Forced to Work – Willing to Survive is a traveling exhibition developed as part of the Erasmus+ project **Forced Labour: Development of an Exhibition and Pedagogical Materials for Schools** by partner organizations from Italy, Austria, and Poland.

The exhibition provides a definition of forced labour, for both past and present. While approximately 20 million men, women, and children were subjected to forced labour under the Nazi regime, an estimated 27.6 million people worldwide are affected by forced labour today. A special focus is placed on the impact of such exploitation on the lives of individuals across Europe during the Nazi dictatorship. Using selected biographies of forced labourers, the history of these years is reconstructed, highlighting the differing circumstances of the three partner countries:

In Austria, parts of the population participated in Nazi crimes following the Anschluss in 1938.

In Poland, occupied by Nazi Germany in 1939, the population was forcibly deported to the Reich for labour, or exploited and murdered in ghettos and concentration camps.

Italy, a German ally until 1943, saw deportations of Jewish citizens and political opponents to concentration camps after Mussolini's overthrow and the occupation by Nazi forces. These individuals were exploited as labourers or murdered, with the assistance of fascist militias.

The final section of the exhibition emphasizes that, despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and laws protecting workplace health and safety, attempts to restrict labour rights persist even today. Migrants from non-EU countries are particularly vulnerable, often experiencing exploitation resembling slavery.

Structure of the Exhibition

The exhibition consists of 21 panels. After introducing the project and its partners, it defines forced labour and presents international agreements made between the two World Wars. The following section outlines the different categories of the over 20 million European forced labourers under the Nazi system.

The main section provides examples from Austria, Italy, and Poland, showcasing the breadth of Nazi forced labour practices. Each country's panels include brief biographies of men, women, youth, and/or children subjected to Nazi forced labour. Their re-enacted testimonies can be accessed and listened to via QR codes.

Photographs of former forced labourers are featured along the lower edges of all panels, offering a glimpse into the scope and diversity of forced labour during the Nazi regime.

The final section highlights efforts—especially those led by former concentration camp prisoners—to outlaw and stigmatize forced labour in the future.

Using the Exhibition

The exhibition is primarily aimed at learners aged 14 and older but is suitable for schools, organizations, public institutions, and interested citizens. Forced labour is a topic rarely covered in depth in educational settings. Therefore, thorough preparation and follow-up with students before and after visiting the exhibition are crucial. It is important to actively engage the target audience, encourage critical thinking, and promote historical awareness. Teaching and learning materials provided on the project website can help educators and facilitators prepare. Visit www.bewusstseinsregion.at or scan the QR code for resources.



Female Prisoners of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp
/ BArch, Image 198-1985-0417-015 / Photographer Unknown

Gender Diversity and Inclusive Language Usage

In developing the exhibition, attention was given not only to including all categories of forced labourers but also to addressing gender distribution. However, certain categories predominantly involved men, such as the Italian Military Internees (IMI) or the captives in the selected concentration camp in Gusen.

It must be noted that female civilian forced labourers faced double discrimination: as foreigners and as women. Their complex and sometimes contradictory roles, as well as gender-specific experiences—such as sexual assault, pregnancy, forced abortions, the removal of children, forced labour in brothels, and similar issues—could only be briefly mentioned

or omitted entirely due to limitations of scope. A dedicated exhibition focusing on these issues would be highly desirable.

The use of inclusive language is essential to acknowledge the diversity of human experiences. The language of the exhibition seeks to reflect this diversity and to respect all gender identities. Consequently, collective formulations or neutral terms were predominantly used. Exceptions occur when explicitly referring to either men or women or in cases where individual human experiences are emphasized. The combination of “women and men” can effectively highlight equality and inclusion, provided that awareness of non-binary and queer identities is consistently maintained.



Portraits of former forced labourers, whose testimonies are presented in the exhibition (f.l.t.r., 1st line): Sergej Zakharovich Ragulin / **Hornung / Langthaler / Schweitzer Collection**; Helene Pawlik / **Hornung / Langthaler / Schweitzer Collection**; Oleksij Panasowytsch Krhlyk / **voestalpine Archive Linz**; Lina Rodgers (née Kusovkova) / **voestalpine Archive Linz**; Jerzy Osuchowski / **Rudolf A. Haunschmied Collection**. (f.l.t.r., 2nd line): Frida Misul / **Private Collection of Roberto Rugiadi**; Aldo Rovai / **Private Collection of Virgilio Rovai**; Henryka Bartnicka-Tajchert / **Museum of the Synagogue Complex in Włódawa**; Władysław Dyrek / **Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum**; Yehezkel Hubermann / **Museum of the Synagogue Complex in Włódawa**



Portraits of former forced labourers, whose testimonies are presented in the exhibition (f.l.t.r., 1st line): Karl Littner / **Rudolf A. Haunschmied Collection**; Emma Casagrande / **Private Collection of Lucia Pergreffi**; Mario Taddei / **Private Collection of Marco Taddei**; Licio Baldacci / **Private Collection of Paulo Baldacci**; Igino di Giusto / **Private Collection of Sergio di Giusto**. (f.l.t.r., 2nd line): Mendele Morgensztern / **Museum of the Synagogue Complex in Włódawa**; Bernhard Falkenberg / **Museum of the Synagogue Complex in Włódawa**; Alexander Aronowitsch Peczerski / **Museum of the Synagogue Complex in Włódawa**; Stéphane Hessel / **Superbass (via Wikimedia Commons)**



Concentration Camp Prisoners of Mauthausen Concentration Camp performing earthworks, 1942 / NARA

On the Concept of „Forced Labour“

Forced labour is defined as „any work or service which a person is required to perform under the threat of any penalty and for which the person has not offered themselves voluntarily.“

This definition comes from the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Forced Labour Convention of 1930. It remains valid today and applies to all forms of exploitation of human labour in contexts where neither free choice is possible nor the ability to negotiate dignified working conditions exists. Forced labour is a violation of human rights and is condemned by international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the ILO.

Categories of Forced Labour in the Nazi System

The individuals subjected to forced labour under the Nazi regime experienced diverse working conditions, deployment areas, and recruitment methods. Nationals of allied states, such as Italians, were recruited by the Nazi regime to address labour shortages in Germany even before World War II began. Over time, their voluntary status was entirely stripped away. With the onset of the war, the Nazi regime extended its control to residents of occupied or annexed territories.

1. Civilian Labourers

Civilians from across Europe were coerced into labour through recruitment, pressure campaigns, obligations, or the arbitrary use of violence and raids. Citizens of allied nations were to be treated like German workers, while others were subjected to racially determined discriminatory practices. Especially harsh regulations were established for Polish and Soviet workers, denying them any rights.

Czech Civilian Workers, Barracks Camp in Linz, 1943 / voestalpine Archive Linz



2. Prisoners of War

International agreements protecting prisoners of war were systematically circumvented to ensure total exploitation of foreign labour forces. For example: Agreements with the collaborationist Vichy regime weakened protections. Polish prisoners were granted only minimal protection under the Hague Conventions of 1907. Soviet prisoners were denied any protection. Italian soldiers were reclassified as *Italian Military Internees* (IMI) to strip them of their rights.

Soviet Prisoners of War had their identification painted onto their uniforms / voestalpine Archive Linz

3. Concentration Camp Prisoners

People detained in concentration camps for political or racial reasons were exploited with no regard for their survival. The principle of „extermination through labour“ was applied to them, subjecting them to absolute dehumanization, prioritization of economic utility, and eventual death.



4. Jewish Forced Labourers

The ideology of „extermination through labour“ was also applied to Jewish labourers, who faced extreme discrimination. Their labour and lives were initially exploited in the occupied territories, where Jews from Germany and Austria were also deported. As labour shortages worsened in the German Reich, the remaining able-bodied Jewish people were brought to the Reich, exploited, and ultimately killed.

Jewish men with improvised Star of David in Mogilev/Mahiljou (Soviet Union, now Belarus), July 1941 / BArch, Image 1011-138-1053-24 / Photographer Rudolf Kessler



Female Agricultural Workers and French Prisoners of War are controlled by German Guards in Lower Austria / **WSiLA, Special Court, Sign. 4732/47**

Forced Labour in Annexed Austria

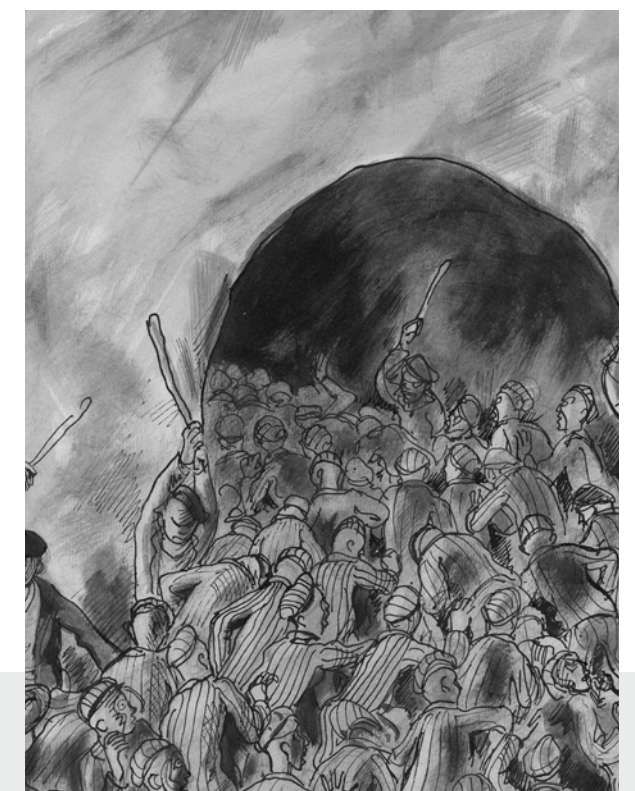
On the territory of present-day Austria, around 200,000 foreign civilian workers were employed **in agriculture and forestry**. Their living conditions depended on the treatment they received by farmers and farmhands. 70% of the agricultural labour force were women. Sexual exploitation was often part of their living conditions. Personal contact with the local population was forbidden, and violations led to internment in labour education camps, concentration camps, or even executions.

As an example of war-critical heavy industry, forced labour

at the **Reichswerke AG Hermann Göring (HGW)** in Linz from 1938 is depicted. Over 30,000 male and 4,000 female foreign civilian workers from all over Europe, as well as IMI (Italian military internees) and approximately 7,000 Mauthausen concentration camp prisoners, were exploited there. They were required to help build the factory and work in munitions production. Separated by status, nationality, and gender, they were housed in camps where they were at the mercy of the behavior of the foremen. The concentration camp prisoners and Soviet civilian workers were not allowed to access the shelters when

Linz was bombed by the Allies starting in the summer of 1944.

In the final years of the war, many critical war-related munitions factories were moved into underground tunnels, which thousands of concentration camp prisoners had to build under inhuman conditions, and which were used for war production. The conditions in the camps and production sites, such as in the **Gusen II camp** and in the **„Bergkristall“ tunnel facility**, were characterized by hunger and terror.



Drawing „In the Tunnel“ by former concentration camp prisoner Jean Bernard Aldebert / **Archive of the Mauthausen Concentration Camp Memorial**



Forced labourers marked as IMI during bomb clearance work in Linz
/ voestalpine Archive Linz

Italian Forced Labourers

The fascist regime of Benito Mussolini initially fought alongside Nazi Germany. After the fascist government was deposed and after the armistice with the allies of September 8, 1943, Italy was occupied by Nazi troops. In northern Italy, under Mussolini's leadership, a collaborationist government was established, known as the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (RSI).

Starting in 1938, an agreement between the Italian and German governments led to the forced labour of around 400,000 people who were sent to the German Reich. They were attracted by recruitment campaigns, relatively favourable contracts and wages, as well as the promise of the right to return. After the armistice, the situation drastically changed, and the workers in the Reich were subjected to forced labour, losing their previous rights. At the same time, the Italian military was disarmed, and soldiers were interned in prisoner-of-war camps, where they were used for forced labour as Italian Military Interned (IMI).

In 1943, the persecution of Jews, which had begun in 1938 with the announcement of the racial laws, intensified. German and Italian authorities carried out arrests and deportations to concentration and extermination camps. The majority were murdered in gas chambers, with only a few deemed fit for labour and forced to work. Thousands of Italian men and women were also arrested as political opponents, partisans, and sympathizers of the resistance, and became victims of „extermination through labour“ in the national socialist concentration camps.

„Italian workers! Enlist now! Greater Germany will protect you.“ Recruitment poster for labour in Italy / **Istituto Storico Toscano della Resistenza e dell'Età Contemporanea, Fondo Roberto Caspoli**





Forced labourers from the labour camp of Bernhard Falkenberg working on river regulation near Włodawa
/ Muzeum Zespół Synagogałny we Włodawie

Forced labour and extermination in occupied Poland

Even before Germany's invasion of Poland, Adolf Hitler proclaimed a policy of terror against the state and its citizens on August 22, 1939. This included forced recruitment of Polish labour, the internment of Jewish Poles in ghettos, and their murder in concentration and extermination camps.

The town of Włodawa represents the situation across Poland. Arrests and deportations of people, as well as the recruitment

for forced labour, began in 1939 and intensified in 1942 with the German occupation authority's decree on forced labour. This allowed even subordinate authorities to force any Polish person to change their workplace. Pressure was exerted through the arrest of family members, the confiscation of property, or the threat of deportation to a concentration camp.

The Jewish population was herded into ghettos, such as the one established in Włodawa in 1940. The living condi-

tions were so catastrophic that many died from disease and hunger. The survivors of the dire conditions in the Włodawa ghetto were deported to the nearby extermination camp Sobibór between 1942 and 1943, where they were murdered.

Numerous labour and prisoner-of-war camps existed around the town. Even in Sobibór, as in all other concentration and extermination camps, prisoners were forced to work. Their labour maintained the camp operations and included remo-

ving bodies from gas chambers and cremating them.

After a revolt and the escape of prisoners from Sobibór in October 1943, the extermination camp was dismantled. Around 170,000 people had been killed there.



„Let's go to agricultural work in Germany. Report immediately to your mayor.” Recruitment poster, 1940/1941
/ Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe



Eleanor Roosevelt, as a member of the UN Human Rights Commission involved in drafting the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights,' presents the declaration in 1949 / FDR Presidential Library & Museum

International Agreements

In the Interwar Period

The 1930 *Convention on Forced or Compulsory Labour*, established by the ILO (International Labour Organization) after World War I, aimed to abolish forced or compulsory labour in all its forms. The agreement, structured into 33 articles, each addressing a specific aspect of forced labour, defined the boundaries and scope of the issue. While the convention acknowledged the possibility of temporary forced labour for certain public needs, it established a series of fundamental principles, such as respect for workers' rights, fair compensation, the prohibition of forced relocation, and the need for strict monitoring of forced labour regulations. The primary goal was to ensure decent working conditions and protect the personal freedom of individuals.

With the Geneva Convention on the *Treatment of Prisoners of War*, dated July 27, 1929, the League of Nations additionally regulated the use of forced labour for captured soldiers. Prisoners were to be "treated humanely and, in particular, protected from violence, insults, and public curiosity." The Geneva Convention explicitly prohibited the use of prisoners of war in munitions production.

After World War II

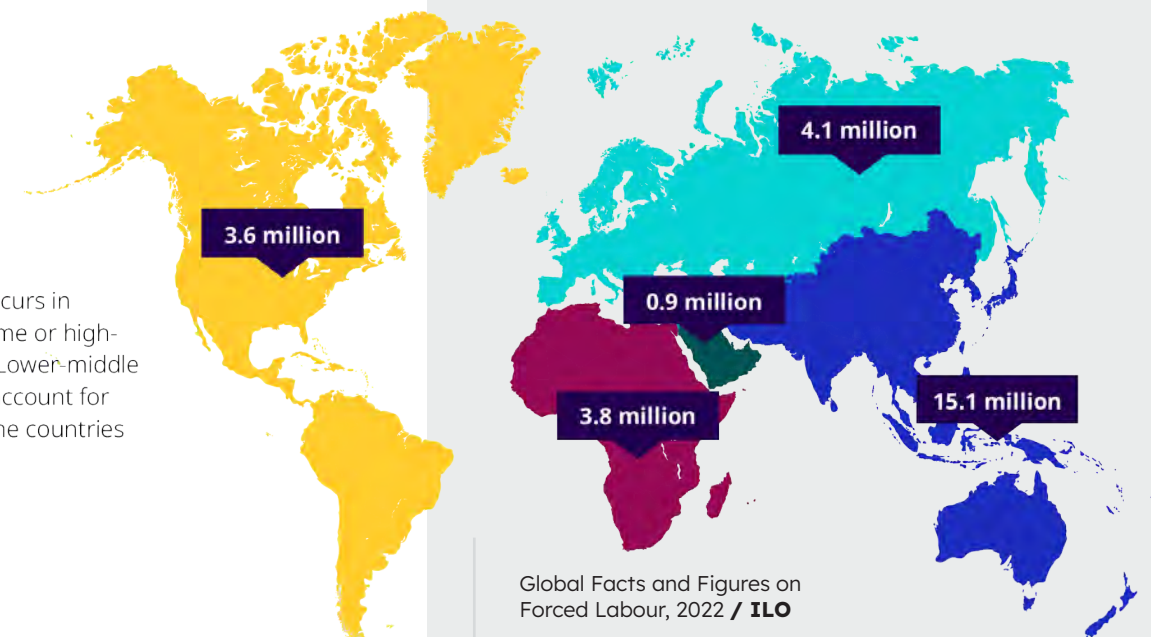
The aim of the United Nations (founded in 1945) was to prevent crimes against humanity by imposing sanctions on those responsible.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN was a response to the atrocities of the Nazi regime, which had stripped millions of people of their rights and led to discrimination, exploitation, and murder. The declaration, consisting of 30 articles, reaffirmed civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, condemned all forms of discrimination, and prohibited torture and arbitrary arrest. Additionally, it established the right to dignified work and social security. It was adopted on December 10, 1948, by the UN General Assembly with 48 votes in favour and none against, and it has since been ratified by 192 UN member states. It remains the foundation for the respect of the rights of every individual.

Where does forced labour occur?



Total forced labour ³



The present situation: "Modern Slavery"

Despite all efforts to combat forced labour, forms of exploitation still exist today. These are encompassed under the term 'Modern Slavery' and include, in addition to labour exploitation, forced marriage and human trafficking.

According to the ILO, 27.6 million people worldwide are affected by forced labour, with 17.3 million in the private sector. This number does not include victims of sexual exploitation, especially women.

The phenomenon of forced labour also affects 3.3 million children. Migrants are disproportionately affected by forced labour. In the past five years, the number of forced labour cases has increased by 20%.

According to estimates from 2012, based on the ILO's Global Estimate of Forced Labour, about 880,000 people in the European Union are living under such coercive conditions, the majority of whom are women who are victims of sexual exploitation.

Forced labour occurs today in all sectors of the economy. The exemplary exploitation stories of women and men, whose names are anonymized for their own safety, illustrate the bypassing of labour protection and safety regulations in countries like Italy, Austria, and Poland today.



Portraits of two workers presented in the exhibition, who have been killed while working in Italy: Soumaila Sacko / Domani, 12. August 2021; Satnam Singh / ANSA, 20. Juni 2024



Project Team



Mauthausen Memorial- Student Exchange



Project Meeting Empoli



Multiplier Event Austria



Multiplier Event Poland



Multiplier Event Italy

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The Exhibition can be ordered from: **Bewusstseinsregion Mauthausen – Gusen – St. Georgen** | Marcel-Callo-Straße 3 | A – 4222 St. Georgen / Gusen | e-Mail: sekretariat@bewusstseinsregion.at | All materials can be seen on the project website: www.bewusstseinsregion.at

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