

Johannes-Dieter Steinert. *Deportation und Zwangsarbeit. Polnische und sowjetische Kinder im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und im besetzten Osteuropa 1939–1945.* [Deportation and Forced Labour. Polish and Soviet Children in Nazi Germany and Occupied Eastern Europe 1939–1945] Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2013. 306 pp. Bibliography. Paper.

German occupation of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union involved forced labour for large sectors of the population. Less well known is the age structure of these slaves: many were children, youth, or young adults. As Johannes-Dieter Steinert shows in this important monograph, the longer the war went on, the younger those forced to work for the Germans became, encompassing ten-year-olds by 1944. This book focuses on Polish and Soviet non-Jewish victims. A companion volume on Jewish children is in the making.

Steinert explores three main settings for forced labour: deportation to Germany, work in the occupied territories, and concentration camps. While the details and the level of exploitation and suffering varied between different sites of labour, there was much commonality. Most child slaves experienced hunger, cold, poor clothing, terrible accommodation, extremely hard work, fear, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, murder, and death.

The book makes for grim reading. It is based on a wide variety of primary sources: archives in Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, the United States, and Israel; interview collections; letters; memoirs; and witness accounts. Using these, the author reconstructs not only the policies of forced labour and their implementation, but also, and more centrally, the experience of these children and the memories they brought home with them, if they survived.

The book contributes to the historiography on Nazi Germany and the Nazi empire, as well as to debates on compensation and restitution. However, historians of the Soviet, or of Ukrainian, wartime experience will find it less compelling. The treatment of Polish and Soviet children as more or less one group leads to some unasked questions. Well before the Germans attacked, Soviet children and youth were subject to coerced labour, were exposed to draconian laws, and suffered physical hardship to a degree unknown to their Polish counterparts. Since 1935, the age of criminal responsibility had been twelve years. Since 1940, youth between the ages of fourteen and seventeen were liable to be conscripted, usually against their will and if necessary by force, into factory training or trade schools. These constituted a form of indentured labour. Teaching staff were frequently abusive, and students were threatened with concentration camp

terms should they “desert” from these establishments. Living conditions were such that many, nevertheless, took the risk. Teenage labour in collective farms was fairly widespread and in 1942 became compulsory for twelve- to sixteen-year-olds. For at least some of Hitler’s young slaves, then, German occupation meant the transition not from happy family life to forced labour, but from one form of forced labour to another. Moreover, these children and youth came from regions (like Ukraine), which had suffered greatly during de-kulakization, the great famine, and the great terror. Many had lost family members and had to grow up very quickly. A significant proportion, thus, were not ripped out of existing emotional bonds of home and family in the same way Polish children were. This background does not relativize the brutality of the German forced labour system, but it must have structured the way Soviet youth dealt with their deportation to Germany or their forced labour in the occupied territories.

Likewise, historians of childhood in wartime will find the adoption of the legal definition of a child as a person younger than eighteen years somewhat troubling. Of course, the transition between childhood, youth, and young adulthood is somewhat blurry and depends on historical context. Nevertheless, the needs, desires, and abilities to act of a ten-year-old are quite different than those of an eighteen-year-old. In this book, we meet “children” who have their pubic hair shaved (87, 90), and in one case we even encounter a twenty-year-old, who even by the book’s expansive definition was no longer a child in any meaningful sense of the word (228–29). The suggestion that teenagers might have had sexual relationships at the border between consensual sex and prostitution is “categorically rejected” on the assumption that these were children and, hence, could not have had consensual sex (186–87). Only a few pages later, meanwhile, the book offers evidence of love affairs between deported youth and their German coevals, but such episodes are only discussed in the context of the terrible punishment meted out to transgressors of the racial purity laws, not as evidence of sexual and other agency of these “children” (189–90).

There are other questions Steinert does not want to pose. A discussion of levels of compulsion and “potential voluntarism” of the victims of German deportations is “out of the question” (*verboten sich*, 279). Why? We do know that there were grown up Soviets who volunteered to work in Germany in order to escape Stalin’s socialism. This was not the majority experience of those who worked for the German war effort, but that it did take place is a historical fact. Why could sixteen-year-olds not harbour similar schemes, however misconceived? The answer, of course, is that such questions must not be posed because they might water down the case for compensation. One can sympathize with the sentiment but still disagree on the tactics: simply refusing to ask a question does not keep others from

answering it, and they might well do so from a different angle and with a different political goal. Even the minority who volunteered to work in Germany found themselves treated as racially inferior work slaves; they were not treated with any more concern than those who had been rounded up by force of arms; they are as worthy recipients of compensation as any other victim.

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