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Polish Forced Labourers in the Klaipėda Region during World War II

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This paper examines the plight of Polish forced labourers in the Klaipėda region during World War II, shedding light on a lesser-known aspect of Nazi occupation policies. Drawing on a database maintained by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance, the author collected data on nearly 2,000 Polish individuals subjected to forced labour in Klaipėda. Through archival research and analysis of personal testimonies, the study explores the demographics, origins, working conditions, and treatment of these labourers.

The occupation of Klaipada by Nazi Germany resulted in the displacement of local populations and the influx of foreign workers to meet wartime labour demands. Polish labourers, predominantly young and from economically disadvantaged regions like Ciechanów, were among those forcibly mobilized. They were subjected to harsh treatment, discriminatory laws, and often found themselves in precarious working and living conditions.

The paper highlights the experiences of Polish labourers in various industries, including construction and agriculture, and examines the motivations behind their escapes from forced labour. It also addresses the sensitive issue of sexual violence against female Polish workers, which remains largely overlooked in historiography.

The liberation of Klaipėda by Soviet forces in 1945 brought an end to forced labour in the region, but many labourers faced further hardships, including mistreatment by Soviet authorities. The paper concludes with reflections on the post-war reparations process and calls for further research and cross-border cooperation to fully understand the history of forced labour in the Klaipėda region and its lasting impact on affected communities.

Keywords: World war II, forced labour during world war II, polish labourer, gestapo, gesta-
po Zichenau / Schröttersburg, Klaipėda, Memelgebiet, Institute of National Remembrance.

Introduction

In the course of history, Klaipėda formed as a typical Lithuanian-German border town, which, although to a much lesser extent, was also influenced by Polish and Jewish elements. The peaceful everyday coexistence turned into a conflict at the decisive moment of World War II, when the victorious side, Nazi Germany, imposed its domination on the defeated. One of the manifestations of this was forced labour. This was 20th-century slavery, which affected broad masses of people from the very beginning of the war – both the Lithuanian inhabitants of Klaipėda and the foreigners streaming in from the lands occupied by the Third Reich. One of the largest groups of foreigners was the Poles, who, for this relatively short period of time, became an integral part of the local landscape.

With every year that Hitler was in power, the need for manpower increased. By September 1939, Nazi Germany had gone from having more than 6 million unemployed to dealing with an acute shortage of labour. This happened as a result of them adapting their economy for war purposes, including the launch of major infrastructure investments, the construction of fortifications, and the expansion of the army. Anticipating the inevitable military clash, Hitler announced as early as May 1939 that the non-German population would be used en masse for the Reich's industry. As he announced: *The population of the non-German areas shall not perform any military service and shall remain available for work duties.*¹ These announcements were incorporated later that year during the campaign against Poland. The Wehrmacht's orders were followed by the officials at the German labour office [German: Arbeitsamt], who established branches in Rybnik on 3 September 1939, in Tarnowskie Góry and Pszczyna on 4 September, and in Katowice, Poznań, Kielce and Radom by 20 September.² From the first days of the war, forced labour became both an element of economic exploitation of the conquered nation and a means of subjugating the Polish population through economic marginalisation. On 15 March 1940, Heinrich Himmler went even further in his statement at a convention of concentration camp commanders: *All qualified Polish workers must be used in our war industry, and then all Poles will disappear from the face of the earth.*³ In his diary, Hans Frank, the Governor-General of the General Governorate [German: Generalgouvernement], wrote of his hopes for limiting the growth of the Polish population: *...cheap labourers should be sent [to work] by the hundreds and thousands – this will stop the biological growth of this country.*⁴ The total number of Poles forced to work during World War II in

¹ Eva Seeber, *Robotnicy przymusowi w faszystowskiej gospodarce wojennej*, Warsaw, 1972, p. 33.

² Jerzy Woźniak, "Wstęp", in: *Berlin: wspomnienia Polaków z robót przymusowych w stolicy III Rzeszy w latach 1939–1945*, ed. E. Kubaczyk, Warsaw, 2012, p. 12.

³ Janusz Gmitruk, and Dariusz Pawłoś, "Przedmowa", in: *idem*, p. 6.

⁴ Jerzy Woźniak, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

various areas of the Third Reich is currently estimated to have been between 2.8 and 3 million.⁵

At least in Poland, the topic of forced labour was particularly popular in the 1970s and 1990s (in response to compensation paid by Germany to people who had been forced to work for the Third Reich against their will). The topic is currently experiencing a small renaissance, which has been reflected in recent academic conferences,⁶ articles and source publications.⁷ Part of the reason for this topic becoming popular again is the digitisation of historical sources and the creation of open source databases, which make it possible not only to revise old findings, but also to address new, more detailed topics. This article finds its roots in the daily work of the author on one such database – straty.pl, which was developed and is maintained by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (Polish: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej; IPN).⁸ As it turns out, one of the strengths of this database is the ability to extract macro data (about a specific location or type of repression) with the source of the information published for each case included. Based on this, it was possible to collect the personal data of almost 2,000 Poles who were sent to the Klaipėda Region for forced labour during World War II and whose fate became the beginning of the search for further materials.⁹ The intention was to use this very specific data to take a closer look at how Poles were subjected to forced labour in Klaipėda during World War II. Who were the workers who were sent to Klaipėda, why did they end up there, where exactly did they work, what conditions did they live in, and what impact did being forced to work in the Klaipėda Region ultimately have on them? Some conservative numerical and statistical estimates will also be attempted.

⁵ Janusz Gmitruk, "Wstęp", in: *Ostpreussen: wspomnienia Polaków wywiezionych na roboty przymusowe do Prus Wschodnich w latach 1939–1945*, ed. Rafal Degiel, Warsaw, 2010, p. 6; Zbigniew Grządzielski, Josef Sowa, *Zniewoleni*, Częstochowa, 2010, p. 10.

⁶ "Robotnicy przymusowi – zapomniane ofiary III Rzeszy" ["Forced Labourers: The Forgotten Victims of the Third Reich"], organised by the Auschwitz Memorial Museum on 21 September 2023; "Praca przymusowa podczas II wojny światowej, jej pamięć i konsekwencje" ["Forced Labour during World War II and its Memory and Consequences"], organised by the University of Szczecin on 8–9 May 2018.

⁷ Just to mention the latest publication on forced labour in East Prussia: *Ostpreussen: wspomnienia Polaków wywiezionych na roboty przymusowe do Prus Wschodnich w latach 1939–1945*, e. Rafal Degiel, Warsaw, 2010; Halina Fedorowicz, Jerzy Litwin, *Dzienniki: zapiski z robot przymusowych w Prusach Wschodnich 1944–1945*, Gdańsk ; Sztutowo, 2016; Emilia Figura-Oselkowska, "Wspomnienia i pamiętniki więźniów obozów niemieckich oraz robotników przymusowych w Prusach Wschodnich w zbiorach Biblioteki Instytutu Północnego im. Wojciecha Kętrzyńskiego w Olsztynie", *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, 2020, Vol. 309, No. 3; Cezary Tryk, "Pracownicy przymusowi w gospodarce leśnej Prus Wschodnich w latach 1941–1944 : (na przykładzie nadleśnictwa Kudypy)", *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, 2005, No. 3.

⁸ At present, the database contains information on victims of the repressive apparatus of the Third Reich obtained on the basis of archival materials from various institutions (primarily in Poland, but also abroad).

⁹ It is unlikely that the full number of repressed individuals will ever be determined. For example, through our own research and macro data extracted from the straty.pl database, it was possible to identify a total of 2,179 forced labourers in the Klaipėda Region. Meanwhile, official German data refer to a total of 11,476 foreign workers in the Klaipėda Region (AIPN, GK 196/362, p. 289). The author has plans to publish a list of the forced labourers online.

The research area is limited by the borders of the administrative division of Klaipėda (German: *Landkreis Memel*) in the governmental district of Königsberg (German: *Regierungsbezirk Königsberg*), part of the former Klaipėda Region (German: *Memelland* or *Memelgebiet*; Lithuanian: *Klaipėdos kraštas*) made up of the townships (German: *Ämter*) of Klaipėda, Šilutė and Pogegai (the Germans incorporated the latter two into the governmental district of Gumbinnen in 1939, with Pogegai going to the administrative division of Tilsit-Ragnit). The topic of forced labour in the Klaipėda region itself has thus far remained on the side-lines in terms of historian interest. Bohdana Kozięło-Poklewskiego has outlined the main factual circumstances and background of the events for the entire area of East Prussia.¹⁰ The topic of Klaipėda was taken up from a broader research perspective by Piotr Łossowski and Andrzej Sakson, who made an interesting comparison of the Klaipėda Region with the region of Działdów.¹¹ Arūnė Arbušauskaitė and Arūnas Bubnys have discussed the subject of (Polish) prisoners of war in the vicinity of Šilutė.¹²

The most important material that was found was in the central archive of the IPN in Warsaw, which contains, above all, Gestapo files for the administrative division of Ciechanów [German: *Landkreis Zichenau*]. These files include records of cases against people who tried to escape from forced labour.¹³ Valuable material – albeit to a less significant extent – was also found at IPN branches outside of Warsaw. The Central Archives of Modern Records [Polish: *Archiwum Akt Nowych*] was another valuable source of information, as it holds a collection of applications submitted by former forced labourers to the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation [Polish: *Fundacja „Polsko-Niemieckie Pojednanie”*; German: *Stiftung „Polnisch-Deutsche Aussöhnung”*] for reparations from the German government. There are also a wealth of memoirs spread across different institutions, such as Instytut Północny in Olsztyn,¹⁴ the Central Military Archives [Polish: *Centralne Archiwum*

¹⁰ B. Kozięło-Poklewski, *Zagraniczni robotnicy przymusowi w Prusach Wschodnich w latach II wojny światowej*, Warsaw, 1977.

¹¹ P. Łossowski, *Kłajpeda kontra Memel. Problem Kłajpedy w latach 1918–1939–1945*, Warszawa 2007; A. Sakson, *Od Kłajpedy do Olsztyna: współczesni mieszkańcy byłych Prus Wschodnich: Kraj Kłajpedzki, Obwód Kaliningradzki, Warmia i Mazury*, Poznań, 2011.

¹² Arūnė L. Arbušauskaitė, Arūnas Bubnys, “Nazi Germany-controlled POW camps in the environs of Šilutė 1939–1944”, in: *Macikai House of Death: The WWII Prisoner of War and Gulag Camps 1939–1955 in the Environs of Šilutė*, ed. E. Jankauskienė, Vilnius, 2020.

¹³ Archive of Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw (hereinafter – AIPN), GK 193, Materiały konkursu Redakcji “Robotnika Rolnego” na temat przymusowego pobytu robotników w III Rzeszy [entries submitted to the editorial board of the newspaper Robotnik Rolny for a competition on forced labour in the Third Reich]; GK 196, Najwyższy Trybunał Narodowy [Supreme National Tribunal – especially the trial documents of State Secretary of the General Government Josef Bühler]; AIPN, GK 629, Geheime Staatspolizei, Staatspolizeistelle Zichenau / Schröttersburg; BU 2448, Ankiety Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Polsce [Questionnaires of the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland].

¹⁴ Henryk Wejman’s memoirs, sign. R-343.

Wojskowe] in Warsaw,¹⁵ and the Ossolineum Library at the Ossoliński National Institute [Polish: *Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich*] in Wrocław.¹⁶

Objective of the article

The objective of the article is to examine the experience of Polish people who were subjected to forced labour in the Klaipėda Region during World War II. The author aims to explore various aspects of this phenomenon, including the demographics and origins of the forced labourers, the conditions they endured, the types of work they were given, how they were treated, the reasons for escape attempts, and ultimately – their liberation. The article also discusses the broader historical context of the Nazi occupation of Klaipėda and the influx of foreign labourers to meet the demands of the wartime economy. The author uses data from a variety of archival sources, personal testimonies and secondary literature to shed light on this relatively understudied aspect of the war. Through this analysis, the article is intended to contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of forced labourers in the region and to encourage further research on the topic.

Klaipėda in German Hands

On 20 March 1939, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania Juozas Urbšys was on his way back from the coronation of Pope Pius XII when he stopped in Berlin. There, Ribbentrop gave him the infamous ultimatum demanding that the Klaipėda Region be handed over to the Germans. The treaty was signed, resulting in the loss of the only port, through which 80 per cent of Lithuanian trade passed, as well as two-thirds of Lithuania's access to the sea and one-third of its industry. In addition 10,000 people were forced to emigrate from Klaipėda.¹⁷ The Germans triumphed, but in their Eastern policy, they were not guided only by profit and loss calculations – they were also driven by emotions and believed in the propaganda about the need for a *Lebensraum* (“living space”) in the East for the ever-expanding German nation [German: *Herrenvolk*]. However, the concept of a lack of living space clearly contradicted the so-called *Ostflucht* (“flight from the East”) – the continuous exodus of the German population from the territory of East Prussia and the ever-increasing shortage of manpower,¹⁸ which later contributed to one of the hi-

¹⁵ Sign. III 49/19, Home Army. Reports and memories. Report by Stefan Kosko from the Suwałki-Augustów Region: killing of the confidant Pawlukaitis in the village of Dębniak.

¹⁶ Anna Podczarska (b. 1923), “Wspomnienia z czasów II wojny światowej” [“Memoirs from World War II”], sign. 15459/II, mf 9807.

¹⁷ Vytautas Tininis, “Political-economic and cultural situation”, in: *Lithuania in 1940–1991: The History of Occupied Lithuania*, ed. Arvydas Anušauskas, Vilnius, 2015, p. 34.

¹⁸ Robert Brier, Sabine Merten, “Der polnische “Westgedanke” nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg (1944–1950)”, [online], in: <https://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/546/> [08-02-2024].

ghest percentages of foreign workers in the entire Reich (an estimated 10-13 per cent).¹⁹ At the same time, the German leadership did not develop a coherent occupation policy, instead operating on the basis of immediate needs resolved by National Socialist ideology.²⁰ Thus, from the very beginning of the occupation, Lithuanian residents who could pose a political threat, such as policemen or civil servants, were being expelled,²¹ as were prominent figures, such as Vincas Rastenis, the editor of the newspaper *Vakarai*. The same applied to the Jewish population, which in 1938 accounted for less than 12 per cent (6,000) of the total population in the administrative division of Klaipėda, and owned 25 per cent of the local shops and 20 per cent of industry. The last of them were forced to leave the city on 14 April 1939.²² One might note that many people did not expect anything good from the Nazis, and a large group of both Lithuanians and Jews, sensing the threat of repression, fled from Klaipėda towards Tauragė and Kretinga as the Germans were approaching the city.²³

Political rationale prevailed over economic rationale, so the gap in the labour market continued to widen. As we can see in Figure 1, with the growing needs of the wartime economy, the labour market absorbed more and more workers. It is also worth noting that the year 1939 shows how great the needs of the economy already were at that time, and what an impact mobilisation had made on the economy. The fact that Lithuanian workers were sent to build fortifications along the Siegfried Line on the French-German border in March and April 1939 foreshadowed the future German labour policy even before the outbreak of war.²⁴ Any gaps in the following years of the war were filled by leaps and bounds with forced labour from conquered areas. As we can see in Figure 2, the number of foreign workers increased by about 60 per cent in the beginning of 1942. For East Prussia (the province which Klaipėda belonged to), this number went from 63,680 in April 1941 to 99,913 in January 1942. The vast majority of these people were from Poland (52,879 were registered in April 1941 and 73,899 in January 1942).²⁵ In the Reich, including the areas of Austria, Sudetenland and Klaipėda, the number of workers remained stable at 36 million

¹⁹ AIPN, GK 196/362, p. 204.

²⁰ Czesław Madajczyk, *Polityka III Rzeszy w okupowanej Polsce*, Warsaw, 1970, Vol. 1, p. 6; As Overy mentions, the Germans were close to fulfilling their economic objectives in 1941. Meanwhile, Madajczyk points out that these were merely actions dictated by wartime necessity, and it is only in the short period 1941–1942 that we can speak of an attempt to pursue a coherent occupation policy. Richard James Overy, "Mobilization for Total War in Germany 1939–1941", *The English Historical Review*, 1988, Vol. 103, No. 408, p. 63.

²¹ Born on 20 March 1900 in Olgino, Pranas Heisers was a Lithuanian policeman who, on the orders of the Germans, left Klaipėda and went to live on his own farm in Taurai, H02742/0004/3.2.1.1., ITS Digital Archive.

²² G. Białuński, "Prusy Wschodnie przyczółkiem Trzeciej Rzeszy?", *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, 2001, No. 3, p. 384.

²³ Piotr Łossowski, p. 185.

²⁴ AAN, sign. 2/471/0/-/4, Trade negotiations after the seizure of Klaipėda. Report from the Polish Embassy in Berlin, pp. 4–5.

²⁵ AIPN, GK 196/342, pp. 208, 211, 284, 289.

throughout the war, despite the ongoing conscription, which accounted for a total of 13 million recruits in September 1944.²⁶

Sources of Labour: Prisoners of War and Occupied Territories of Poland

The first Polish labourers in the Klaipėda Region were prisoners of war. After being defeated by the German Army, over 420,000 Polish soldiers were taken prisoner. Most of them were released immediately, while others were sent to *Stalags* (camp for enlisted prisoners of war) or *Oflags* (prisoner-of-war camps for officers). On 22 May 1940, going against the Geneva Convention, Hitler decided to deprive most of them of their POW status and release them as civilian workers.²⁷ The first forced labourers were prisoners of war who appeared in the Šilutė area as early as autumn 1939, in the villages of Pagryniai, Kalveliškės, Piktaičiai, Šilviai, Pašyšiai, Meišlaukiai and Traksėdžiai. It is documented that on 9-31 October 1939, 40 of them took part in the construction of the Šilutė (German: *Heydekrug*) – Užliekniai (German: *Uszlöknen*) – Urbiškiai [German: *Bögschen*; now *Armalėnai*] road; it is also known that 33 Polish POWs worked on roads in Pagryniai between 17 October and 30 November 1939. There are also surviving payroll documents confirming the presence of Polish prisoners of war in Šilutė Township in January 1940.²⁸

According to Bubnys and Arbušauskaitė, POWs were brought from the Stablack main camp (German: *Kriegsgefangenenstammlager Stablack*), but for the period of the roadwork, were kept at a POW camp in Kalveliškiai (German: *Kallwelischken*), as well as at smaller camps organised as needed: for example, a man from Gaideliai named Michel Schermoks set up a camp for 10 Polish prisoners of war.²⁹ After the Third Reich attacked the USSR, a camp was established in the Klaipėda Region near Macikai (German: *Matzicken*). Over time, this camp was filled with prisoners of war from the Polish II Corps under the command of General Władysław Anders, which had been operating in southern Italy since December 1943. Western prisoners of war (unlike Soviet POWs) were treated properly and were not forced to work³⁰ – it is possible that the situation of the Poles in this camp was similar. Little information has survived from the subsequent period about Polish prisoners of war. It is known that there were two Poles working for the farmer Gustav Friederici in the village of Barzdūnai until 1942. One Polish prisoner of war worked in Rusnė for the blacksmith Ueckermarck (who was accused of treating the prisoner too well).

²⁶ Marc Buggeln, *Die Zwangsarbeit im Deutschen Reich 1939–1945 und die Entschädigung vormaliger Zwangsarbeiter nach dem Kriegsende: eine weitgehend statistische Übersicht*, Berlin, 2017, p. 4.

²⁷ Zygmunt Lietz, *Obozy jenieckie w Prusach Wschodnich 1939–1945*, Warsaw, 1982, p. 23.

²⁸ Arūnė L. Arbušauskaitė, Arūnas Bubnys, p. 27, *Macikai House of Death: The WWII Prisoner of War and Gulag Camps 1939–1955 in the Environs of Šilutė*, ed. E. Jankauskienė, Vilnius, 2020, p. 9.

²⁹ A. Arbušauskaitė, A. Bubnys, pp. 27–29.

³⁰ *Macikai House of Death*, pp. 10–11.

According to a report from the Nazi Party in Vyžiai [German: *Wiesenheide*], eight Polish prisoners of war took part in an illegal gathering in February of the same year.³¹ According to reports of the Polish government-in-exile, there were approximately 300 Polish prisoners of war in the Šilutė [German: *Heydekrug*] camp in May 1944.³²

However, the largest group was civilian workers. In the course of my research, I attempted to break down the workers according to their geographical origin. The result of this analysis is Figure 3. This breakdown has some inaccuracies, however. Firstly, the data collected on 2,179 individuals (shown in the following figures) represents only a part – a minimum number – of the Polish workers who ended up in the Klaipėda Region during World War II. Hence, the main purpose of this analysis is just to capture trends. Secondly, the nature of the sources precluded the use of only the place of birth or only the place of residence. However, given people's relatively low mobility at that time, it can be assumed that in most cases, the place of birth was the same as the place of residence. For editorial reasons, a few records from other localities in the United States (New Jersey) and the USSR (Ogrodniki, Olesko, Saint Petersburg, Stara Buda and Supronienty) are not shown here. These were people who decided to return after Poland regained its independence in 1918; in the case of people from Belarus and Ukraine, they might also be refugees from the Red Army – unfortunately, this is only an assumption for the time being, as it has not been possible to trace the fate of these people.

The research made it possible to establish the exact place of residence of 1,082 people (graphically depicted in Figure 3). The largest number of workers (455, or 42 per cent) came from the pre-war Białystok Voivodeship, while 395 (36.5 per cent) of them came from the Białystok District [German: *Bezirk Bjelostock*] and as many as 60 people (approximately 5.5 per cent) came from the Suwałki Region (which was annexed to the governmental district of Gumbinnen in 1939). These figures show that the Germans began their intensive economic exploitation immediately after the occupation of these areas.

The second largest source of labour was the governmental district of Ciechanów [German: *Regierungsbezirk Zichenau*], with 385 workers (35.5 per cent). The high position of this area is not surprising due to its geographical proximity, and from the administrative point of view, it belonged to the same province as Klaipėda – East Prussia. Due to their agricultural character and lack of natural resources, these areas were already struggling economically before the war. The high unemployment rate was compounded by German orders, such as the ban on gatherings, which forced many young people out of education and into unemployment. As Edward Zawadzki recalled:

Yes, it was a difficult time for young people of my age. There were no schools, and the Germans

³¹ A. Arbušauskaitė, A. Bubnys, *op. cit.*, pp. 28–31.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 31 Cf. AAN, 202/III/144, p. 34.

did not take people that young to work. They had enough hands among the elderly, and there wasn't much work in a town like Maków Mazowiecki. Anyone who got a job in a German enterprise felt lucky and thought that this was a way to avoid being sent for forced labour. Many of the older people had already been deported. The rest were loitering in corners, not knowing what to do with their free time. ... It was dangerous at home, because at any moment the police could come in and take them away, as if they belonged to them. ... What could the young people do? Practically nothing. Play cards at most.³³

What is surprising is the number of workers who came from central Poland – mainly from the governmental district of Łódź (110 people). This might be related to the German settlement campaign in Lithuania. Due to its convenient location, Łódź (or Litzmannstadt, as it was called under the German occupation) became the base for the Central Immigration Office [German: *Einwandererzentralstelle*; EWZ] in autumn 1940, and it was here that Lithuanians subject to the terror apparatus of Nazi Germany were also sent.³⁴ It must not be forgotten that this was an area directly incorporated into the Reich, and the flow of labour could be conveniently regulated by the *Arbeitsamts*. A total of 125 people (11.5 per cent) came from these areas, excluding the governmental districts of Gumbinnen and Ciechanów: 112 (10.3 per cent) from the governmental district of Łódź, eight from Inowrocław, two from Bydgoszcz, two from Gdańsk, and one from Poznań. People from the annexed areas accounted for almost 90 per cent of the total. The overall picture is completed by workers from the General Government (89, or approximately 8 per cent).

As Figures 4 and 5 show, half of the workers (50.2 per cent) were sent to work in Klaipėda at an extremely young age, only 14 to 22 years old (born in 1917–1925). A large part of them (13.4 per cent) were born between 1926 and 1929, which clearly shows a tendency to employ the youngest possible workers, especially juxtaposed with the fact that another important significant group (17.4 per cent) were people who could not have reached the age of 30 during the war.

Unfortunately, there were times when children as young as 13 were sent to work, and this was no coincidence.³⁵ This was in line with German regulations, by which work was compulsory in the General Government from the age of 14, and in the territories incorporated into the Reich – from the age of 12.³⁶

³³ Edward Zawadzki, born 10 II 1926 in Maków Mazowiecki. R. Degiel (ed.), *Ostpreussen*, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

³⁴ Alvinas Gailius (1895-05-12-1942-08-18) – Lithuanian official and correspondent in Kaunas. H. Jenkins, *Die Annahmestievereinbarung zwischen Deutschland und Litauen von 1939 und die memelländischen KZ-Insassen*, "Annaberger Annalen" 2015, No. 23, pp. 75–77, 80, 84.

³⁵ Piotr Suchodolski from Majdan (Gmina Szypliszki, Suwałki County). In 1940, at the age of 13, he was taken from a list compiled by the village elder and deported to work in Klaipėda, and then in an unknown direction, after which he disappeared without a trace. AIPN, BU 2448/50, p. 230.

³⁶ Kyril Sosnowski, "Ohne Mitleid". *Dziecko w systemie hitlerowskim*, Warsaw - Poznań, 1962, p. 142.

Type of Work

After examining a sample of 200 random forced labourers in the Klaipėda Region, it was found that most of them (136, or 68 per cent) worked in agriculture. The second largest group (59; 29.5 per cent) worked in industry as locksmiths, carpenters or coachmen, or at the port, shipyards, brickyards, pulp mill, textile factory or sawmills. Only four (2 per cent) worked building trenches and other fortifications, and barely a handful were employed as domestic labourers or in forestry.

As seen above, people were sent to jobs that did not require any major qualifications. However, there were exceptions. Jan Sopelewski from Jednorozec wrote in his memoirs that before being sent to Klaipėda, he took a two-week course in milking cows in Ciechanów run by a local German named Baran.³⁷

Working at construction companies such as Domscheidt's, Lehmann's³⁸ or Lobert's was not the easiest, and this often resulted in attempts to escape;³⁹ people who did not make it were fired and were not taken back, even if they wanted to be (for example, due to lack of other sources of livelihood).⁴⁰ In addition, work in the construction industry was characterised by a certain volatility and going just where the work was, as Tadesz Wójcicki testified to the Gestapo:

In May 1940, I came to Ciechanów... After about a month ... the labour office in Ciechanów placed me in Klaipėda at Lobert's construction company. I worked at Lobert's for about five months, and then, through the labour office in Klaipėda, I came to the Schützenhaus in Klaipėda and worked there as a labourer until 3 February 1942.⁴¹

One of the largest employers was the Klaipėda pulp mill [German: *Zellstoff- und Papierfabrikation Memel*], a branch of the company based in Aschaffenburg. It turns out that the work at this factory was not among the worst. Stanisław Jopek testified:

The pay and the food were good. But I only wanted to go back to my parents in Schröttersburg [Płock]. For this reason, I left Klaipėda with my colleagues [on 25 August 1942].⁴²

In late 1944 and early 1945, during the final months of World War II, Oberpräsident of East Prussia Erich Koch infamously ordered the construction of fortifications in Prussia, claiming that this was necessary for survival, even though he himself was already in Berlin.⁴³

³⁷ Jan Sopelewski, "Wspomnienia wojenne 1939–1945", *Rocznik Przasnyski*, 2014, No. 1, pp. 265–271.

³⁸ AIPN, GK 629/8494, Gestapo Zichenau / Schröttersburg, case of Władysław Duch, born 13 February 1924.

³⁹ AIPN, GK 629/3860, Gestapo Zichenau / Schröttersburg, case of Murzyn Stanisław.

⁴⁰ AIPN, GK 629/6969, Gestapo Zichenau / Schröttersburg, case of Józef Włodarski, born 30 September 1891 in Steinhausen [Polish: Bielsk].

⁴¹ AIPN, GK 629/7001, Gestapo Zichenau / Schröttersburg, case of Wójcicki Henryk Tadeusz.

⁴² Stanisław Jopek, born 31 May 1923 in Płock. On 13 November 1942, he was detained by the criminal police in Płock. At first he was placed in the Steinhausen AEL [German: *Arbeitserziehungslager*; "work and education camp"] before being sent to the Gestapo in Klaipėda. He was moved to the pulp mill in Klaipėda on 15 July 1942. AIPN, GK 629/8947, Gestapo Zichenau / Schröttersburg, case of Stanisław Jopek.

⁴³ Grzegorz Białuński, *op. cit.*, p. 484.

Treatment

The Polish prisoners of war seem to have been treated fairly. The number of working hours did not exceed the norm (e.g. 88 working hours between 1 and 15 January 1940). Wages were meagre (RM 4.54-11.36 for a fortnight's work in January 1940), but they did not differ significantly from what civilian forced labourers in the Reich earned, which was generally RM 30 per month. They also got free board and lodging, as well as medical care at the hospital in Šilutė.⁴⁴

Like other *Ostarbeiters* ("Eastern workers" – foreign slave workers gathered from occupied Central and Eastern Europe), Polish forced labourers were generally treated less favourably, especially compared to people from Western European countries. There was even a legal basis for the differentiation. The so-called "Polish decrees" [German: *Polenerlässe*] of 8 March 1940 regulated many areas of everyday life, such as contacts with Germans, visits to public institutions (as well as cinemas, churches, etc.), and so on. They also introduced the requirement to wear the "P" badge on every garment worn, and placed Poles under the authority of the Gestapo, thus denying them criminal justice.⁴⁵ The decrees went so far as to allow medical care to be withheld, pregnancies to be terminated, and children born in the Reich to be Germanised or even killed as part of the *Sonderbehandlung*.⁴⁶

The first signs of mistreatment usually appeared during the recruitment itself. People often found themselves in a no-win situation where they were ordered to obediently go to work, with the threat of severe reprisals for their entire family if they did not comply. Henryk Wejman recalled:

I had no choice. Not reporting to the gendarmerie was tantamount to the arrest of my whole family. I registered with the Arbeitsamt, and then reported to the gendarmerie station with this office's stamp on the so-called "registration card". They found me on the registration card, and after ticking off my name, they warned me that if I avoided going to Germany, my whole family would be sent there.⁴⁷

The journey to Klaipėda promised more of the same. At each station, a cordon of gendarmes separated them workers from the rest of the population, fearing that one of them might escape. Henryk Wejman continues:

The journey began and lasted almost two days. By morning we realised that we were going north-west. There was a break of several hours in Olsztyn. We were each given black coffee in a paper cup and a slice of bread with marmalade at the station. We were not allowed to get out of the wagons. There were gendarmes standing along the wagons... When we reached Königsberg,

⁴⁴ A. Arbušauskaitė, A. Bubnys, *op. cit.*, pp. 27–28.

⁴⁵ Ulrich Herbert, *Fremdarbeiter: Politik und Praxis des "Ausländereinsatzes" in der Kriegswirtschaft des Dritten Reiches*, Berlin 1999, p. 77ff.

⁴⁶ Bohdan Łukaszewicz, "Praca przymusowa w Trzeciej Rzeszy w latach II wojny światowej", *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie*, 1978, No. 3, p. 489.

⁴⁷ AIPN, GK 193/245, p. 2.

just like in Olsztyn, the station was full of gendarmes and you couldn't get out of the wagons. By midnight we were on our way. In the forenoon we were at our destination. On the platform there was a sign that said "Memel". Nobody knew this town – nobody had ever heard of it.

People destined for agricultural work were basically sent to a slave market. The way this worked was that on the agreed day, the local farmers would gather and then choose a labourer from the people there; after completing the formalities (including paying a fee), they would take the labourer to their farm. Many memoirs mention the shame and humiliation of this almost ancient spectacle. Even those who ended up in decent families rarely had the opportunity to live in suitable conditions. As Jan Soplewski recalled:

In Klaipėda I lived in an attic. The conditions were difficult – it was quite cold in the room, and they didn't even give me a quilt, just two thin blankets. I made a pillow for myself from a sack that I stuffed with hay. I also plugged the gaps in the walls with hay to keep the draught out. And seeing that it was an attic, it was also poorly lit.⁴⁸

On farms, it was common for workers to live and eat in the same rooms, but normal relations between the master and the workers never developed, as is well illustrated by the recollection of Stefan Zarzycki, a Pole from the Płock area who ended up on a farm near Klaipėda:

[The master] did not avoid giving me work that was beyond my strength. He locked me up for the night, taking my shoes and clothes. He pinned a piece of paper on the door to the kitchen, where I went for meals, that said "Vorsicht, Pole ist dein Feind" ["Beware, a Pole is your enemy"]. He often shouted and even beat me for not understanding German and not following orders properly.⁴⁹ One former "slave owner" from Ostpreussen (East Prussia) explained the mistreatment of forced labourers by the laws of war: Our sons were fighting at the front. There was a shortage of manpower. It is natural for conquered peoples to have to work for the victors. They were slaves and we treated them as such. Some treated these working cattle better, others worse. After all, there had to be some justice. They were, for the most part, riffraff.⁵⁰

The topic of sexual violence is taboo in historiography, and so far only a few historians in Poland have made any progress in this field.⁵¹ The German landlords' sense of superiority, better material and social situation or impunity encouraged this type of abuse, and it can be assumed that this was part of the daily life of female forced labourers in Klaipėda. However, sources contain few records of this problem, because the women themselves were often ashamed to share these experiences. So far, only one woman associated with Klaipėda has been found who admitted to being a victim of sexual assault during World War II.⁵²

⁴⁸ Jan Soplewski, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ Bohdan Koziello-Poklewski, B. Łukaszewicz, *Dzieciństwo i młodość ze znakiem „P”: wspomnienia*, Olsztyn, 1982, p. 184.

⁵⁰ Andrzej Sakson, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁵¹ The most recent exemption includes Ostrowska's book published in 2018, which had a resounding echo in Poland. Joanna Ostrowska, *Przemilczane: seksualna praca przymusowa w czasie II wojny światowej* / Joanna Ostrowska, Warsaw, 2018.

⁵² In: "Wspomnienia z czasów II wojny światowej", Anna Podczarska (b. 1923) recalls one such horrific experience.

German women were off limits for Poles, and the punishments for any violations were severe. This is why a Pole named Edward Grzybowski was hanged in the village of Kebeliai [German: *Köbeln*] near Priekulė. The execution took the form of a spectacle that was to reverberate among all the foreign workers in the area. As Marian Gašiorowski testified:

The farmer Schudnagis, who I was working for at the time, told me to go the nearby town of Priekulė, some 4-5 kilometres away, so that I could see something. On the way there, I met a lot of other Poles walking in the same direction. About 200 Poles who had been put to work in the area had gathered in a square on the edge of town. Gallows had been set up in the square, and near it there was a large group of German functionaries dressed in green-grey, yellow and black uniforms...The condemned man was a young Pole – he was about 21 or 22, slim and tall. He was handcuffed. They brought him right into the square. A civilian read the verdict in Polish. ... From the verdict, it became clear that the Pole had been sentenced to death for having physical relations with a German woman. At the end, it was emphasised that any foreigner who committed a similar crime would face the same punishment.⁵³

According to a 10 January 1940 order issued by the Armed Forces High Command [German: *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*; OKW], a prisoner of war could even face the death penalty for offences of this type, but contrary to Lietz's claim, not in all cases.⁵⁴ Józef Kilichowski was twice accused of rape by a German woman named Luise Stöllger (born 12 April 1926 in Galzdonai); the Pole vehemently denied this, claiming that they had only had intercourse once, and that it was Stöllger herself who had initiated it.⁵⁵ Unlike Grzybowski, Kilichowski was not sentenced to death. He was probably put in prison in Tilsit before being sent by the Gestapo to the concentration camp in Stutthof in 1944. Thus, the death penalty was not imposed in all cases. The death penalty required activation of the *Sonderbehandlung* procedure, which involved many levels of the German terror apparatus and may have been used primarily to intimidate foreigners.

Escape Attempts

By far the most important reason for attempting to escape from forced labour was the

⁵³ Witness Marian Gašiorowski's investigation protocol. B 162/19015.

⁵⁴ Zygmunt Lietz, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁵⁵ Józef Kilichowski, born 8 III 1915 in Gdańsk, resided in Lisków in Tuchola county before the war. Captured by the Germans on 29 IX 1939 (POW ID number 27445). He was transferred to work for farmer Barsties in Žemaitkiemis Village (Šilutė County). In 1942 accused of having sexual contacts with Luise Stöllger. It was the practice in Nazi Germany to send to a concentration camp after serving an imposed prison sentence. That is why it is assumed that he had been imprisoned in Tilsit, before on 24 V 1944 Gestapo Tilsit issued a protective custody order (*Schutzhaftbefehl*) and sent him to Stutthof concentration camp, where he was admitted on 5 VI 1944. Józef Kilichowski's personal files, Arolsen Archives, 11.41.2/KEN-KIRI/00029712/0001; KL Stutthof registration book, SMA, I-IIE-10-19, p. 19; A. Arbušauskaitė, A. Bubnys, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

harsh living conditions, as Stanisław Murzyn⁵⁶ testified before the gendarmerie:

In June 1940 I was placed by the Myszniec Labour Office at Domscheidt's in Klaipėda. I worked there until 25 December 1941 and then left my job secretly without any reason. I travelled from Klaipėda to Szczytno by train. I walked from Szczytno to Pełty and crossed the border at Pełty, and then stayed at home and helped my father with the farming. ... I don't want to go back to Domscheidt's because I'm sick and the work there is too hard for me.

But other less obvious reasons were just as common. Henryk Wójcicki testified that the reason for his escape attempt was a telegram about his mother being ill.⁵⁷ Franciszek Dukalski admitted that the reason that he ran away was simple homesickness.⁵⁸

The escape route for the forced labourers took them through the regions of Suwałki and Ciechanów. These areas had been annexed by the Reich, but because of their Polish character, the fugitives could count on being aided in their escape by the locals. This does not mean that these areas were completely safe. The German police even tried to find their informants in smaller towns, who had no objection to "selling" the fugitives to the police. When they uncovered an incident, the local Gestapo officers were often content with giving the fugitives a beating and sending them back to where they came from.⁵⁹ For this reason, the help of the locals could really contribute to a successful escape. For example, a farm hand in Macikai named Marytė Musvydaitė helped her Polish friend and a group of Russians in the summer of 1943 by first supplying them with water, and then guiding them across the Lithuanian border.⁶⁰

Some of the fugitives fell into the hands of the Gestapo in Ciechanów or Płock. As a rule, the first detention was not associated with major repression and usually ended with incarceration in an AEL [German: *Arbeitserziehungslager*; "work and education camp"].⁶¹ However, the posts had some discretion here and the treatment of the case ultimately

⁵⁶ Stanisław Murzyn, born 27 March 1910 in Pełty (Ostrołęka County), escaped from forced labour in Klaipėda on 27 January 1942 and remained in hiding until his arrest on 12 September 1942. On 16 September, he was sent to the Scharfenwiese [Polish: Ostrołęka] AEL. On 17 September 1942, he was sent to the border police [German: Grenzpolizei-Kommissariat; GPK] at Memel. No information was found about his further fate. AIPN, GK 629/3860, Gestapo Zichenau / Schröttersburg, case of Murzyn Stanisław.

⁵⁷ Henryk Tadeusz Wójcicki, born in Warsaw on 3 May 1919, was sent to forced labour in Klaipėda in May 1940. He escaped on 3 February 1942, but was detained just one day later at the railway station in Ciechanów. After serving his sentence at the Zichenau [Polish: Ciechanów] AEL, he was sent back to work. AIPN, GK 629/7001, Gestapo Zichenau / Schröttersburg, case of Wójcicki Henryk Tadeusz.

⁵⁸ Franciszek Dukalski, born on 15 January 1902 in Sisice (Pułtusk County). On 16 May, he was sent by the Pułtusk Labour Office to work at the paper factory in Klaipėda. He worked there until 3 October 1942, at which point he left his job without authorisation. AIPN, GK 629/404, Gestapo Zichenau / Schröttersburg, case of Franciszek Dukalski.

⁵⁹ CA, sygn. III 49/19, Report by Stefan Kosko from the Suwałki-Augustów Region: killing of the confidant Pawlukaitis in the village of Dębniak, p. 88.

⁶⁰ Arūnė L. Arbušauskaitė, Arūnas Bubnys, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

⁶¹ Józefa Góralczyk, born 16 March 1926 in Maków Mazowiecki. On 19 March 1940, she was sent to forced labour on a farm in Budrikai (Klaipėda Region), from which she later escaped. When the German authorities caught her, she was sent back to forced labour. AIPN, BU 2448/1080, p. 5.

depended on how the officer presented it in the final report, as a false confession was enough to end up in the hands of the Gestapo, which was tantamount to the prisoner being moved to a concentration camp.⁶² Stefan Kozłowski belonged to a special group.⁶³ He escaped from forced labour in Klaipėda on 22 June 1942 and took up employment with a company in Przasnysz. However, on 1 September, he was arrested in connection with his earlier escape and put in an AEL in Przasnysz. Kozłowski's case is special in that he had the misfortune of ending up in the hands of the Gestapo when Heinrich Himmler issued Resolution IV 656/42g on 12 December 1942 ordering the placement of an additional 35,000 people in concentration camps due to increased military necessity, which was probably related to the Battle of Stalingrad. As a result, Kozłowski was sent to the Stutthof Concentration Camp, where he managed to survive to see the end of the war.⁶⁴

Liberation

The end of forced labour in Klaipėda was brought by the offensive of the Soviet Army and the occupation of the city on 28 January 1945. As early as October 1944, Hitler ordered a mass evacuation, and the workers were forced to leave together with their masters. The evacuation route was via Königsberg, where the German hoped to board a ship and sail to the West. If the workers had not yet separated from their German masters earlier, this is where they were liberated. Encounters with the Russian Army were not always the most pleasant, especially because of the NKVD. As Jan Soplewski recalled:

In February 1945, Russian troops were approaching Königsberg. We took a skinny horse, a carriage, tinned food – a lot of it, about three sacks – and set off for home. We didn't get far – the NKVD caught us just four hours later. We were thrown into a basement. We sat there for about two months, or maybe even longer. The basement was small, about one and a half metres high. We lay there, side by side, like sardines. Those Russians were worse than the Germans. The soldiers didn't pick on us that much, but the NKVD... They made me take off my trousers and checked if I had any money. They also took away our papers and photos. My shoes were gone because they had taken them from me earlier. An officer with the rank of major interrogated me. He asked me what I was doing at a Germanic man's place.⁶⁵

Unfortunately, not all returns home were happy endings that meant a return to nor-

⁶² Stanisława Michalak, born 20 September 1920 in Błędowo, worked as a farmer in Trušėliai (German: Truschellen; Klaipėda Region), from where she later escaped. She was detained on 21 May 1943 by gendarmerie from Baranów. She was placed in an AEL in Soldau (now Działdowo) for 56 days. The testimony that she had been released proved to be untrue. When this was discovered, it was decided to send her to the Border Police Commissariat [German: *Grenzpolizeikommissariat*] in Klaipėda. On 2 July 1943, she was taken to the Gestapo prison in Klaipėda. No information was found about her further fate. AIPN, GK 629/3584, Gestapo Zichenau / Schröttersburg, case of Stanisława Michalak.

⁶³ AIPN, GK 629/2163, Gestapo Zichenau / Schröttersburg, case of Stefan Kozłowski.

⁶⁴ IPN Gd 623/75, Prosecutor's Office of the District Court in Gdynia 1945–1950.

⁶⁵ Jan Soplewski, *op. cit.*

malcy. Former workers sometimes died soon after due to the inhumane work or mistreatment that they had been forced to endure.⁶⁶

Reparations

The Polish government still sees World War II reparations as an open question,⁶⁷ but an agreement was reached in 1991 that resulted in the establishment of the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation [Polish: *Fundacja „Polsko-Niemieckie Pojednanie”*; German: *Stiftung „Polnisch-Deutsche Aussöhnung”*], which a year later began providing material aid to former victims of forced labour in the Third Reich.⁶⁸ Former workers from Klaipėda also applied for assistance:

In 1941, in April, I was deported for labour ..., I worked in a factory in Memel, now Mielno, Sz-melc [sic] Street until the end of the war. ... I am appealing to the local authorities in Piotrków Trybunalski to the Insepktorat [at] Młynarska Street No. 3 for compensation, because those who were deported to forced labour in Germany probably deserve some compensation. ... I should submit papers ... [but] during the war I lost my papers, I have no witnesses either.⁶⁹

The letter above (personal details withheld for privacy) unfortunately reflects the situation of many other applicants. Torn from their homes, they were forced to work below their qualifications or waste time they could have spent on education. After the war, they ended up in a devastated country and spent most of their lives in humble conditions. The possibility of receiving financial support only appeared towards the end of their lives, but was often denied for administrative reasons: rarely did anyone keep their documents for that many years (if at all), and the years also blurred the details of the past.⁷⁰

Summary

The article presented here was not a systematic study of the issue of forced labour in Klai-

⁶⁶ Wacław Aksinowicz from the village of Łowocie (Gmina Szypliszki) died after his return in hospital – by different accounts, he was either 19 or 22 years old. IPN Bi 1/1035, k. 59–60, 278–280, 282; Bi 1/1234, k. 245–247.

⁶⁷ “The regulation of war reparations is a recurring theme in speeches by top Polish politicians. Donald Tusk wchodzi w buty PiS? Mówi o odszkodowaniach za wojnę od Niemiec”, in: *Business Insider* (12 II 2024), [online], in: <https://businessinsider.com.pl/wiadomosci/donald-tusk-wchodzi-w-buty-pis-mowi-o-odszkodowaniach-za-wojne-od-niemiec/mz40p96> [18-03-2024]; J. Noch, “Wstyd, że premier sobie na to pozwala”. Duda atakuje Tuska za prawdę o reparacjach wojennych, in: *Na Temat* (28 February 2024), [online], in: <https://natemat.pl/544247,duda-nagle-zaatakowal-tuska-w-tle-sprawa-reparacji-wojennych-od-niemcow>, (2024-03-18).

⁶⁸ “The manner in which compensation was paid was often met with dissatisfaction and even ended up before the European Court of Human Rights: European Court of Human Rights (HUDOC) ruling in *Woś v. Poland*”, pp. 5–6, [online], in: [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{"itemid":\["001-68533"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{) (2024-03-18).

⁶⁹ Search correspondence No. 1645606, 6.3.3.2/125518071, ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.

⁷⁰ One of the positive aspects of the establishment of the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation was the impetus to collect information on the repressions suffered by Poles during World War II. On the one hand, there is official correspondence, and on the other hand, there are numerous studies that provide lists of victims at the local level.

pėda during World War II, but merely an attempt to shed light on a small part of it, while signalling the possibilities offered by the latest technologies. By collating a relatively large research sample – data on 2,179 people – it was established beyond a doubt that the Germans deliberately recruited the youngest possible workers, separating them from their families and often wasting the most precious years of their lives to meet the growing demands of the German wartime economy. The sample examined shows that the origin of the vast majority of employees was determined geographically, so nearly 42 per cent of the individuals studied were from the nearest Polish regions – Białystok District and the Suwałki Region. The second largest group (35.5 per cent) came from the governmental district of Ciechanów (German: *Regierungsbezirk Zichenau*), so people from the annexed areas accounted for almost 90 per cent of the total. One surprise was the number of workers who came from central Poland – mainly from the governmental district of Łódź.

The sample surveyed revealed that the vast majority of workers (around 70 people) were employed in agriculture. Meanwhile, roughly 30 per cent of the labourers worked in industry. These were simple jobs. The Nazi laws that were enacted pushed the Polish population to the margins, even allowing people to be executed for having contact with Germans. As a rule, the forced labourers worked in poor conditions, but there were exceptions and many accounts speak of fair treatment of Poles.

The author hopes that his attempt to present the situation of forced labour in the Third Reich, even in such a small part, will encourage more detailed research on this topic. The history of the area of what was once East Prussia, by being cut short so drastically, may encourage cross-border and transnational cooperation between different communities and institutions, not only from Poland, Lithuania and Germany, but also from Ukraine and hopefully someday – Russia as well.

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Dawid Chomej

Lenkų priverstiniai darbininkai Klaipėdos krašte Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama lenkų priverstinių darbininkų padėtis Klaipėdos krašte Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais, atskleidžiant mažiau žinomą nacių okupacinės politikos aspektą. Remdamasis Lenkijos tautos atminties instituto tvarkoma duomenų baze, autorius surinko duomenis apie beveik 2 000 lenkų tautybės asmenų, kuriems Klaipėdos krašte buvo taikomi priverčiamieji darbai. Remiantis archyviniais tyrimais ir asmeninių liudijimų analize, tyrime nagrinėjama šių darbininkų demografinė padėtis, kilmė, darbo sąlygos ir elgesys su jais. Nacistinei Vokietijai okupavus Klaipėdą, vietiniai gyventojai buvo išskeldinti, o karo meto darbo jėgos poreikiams tenkinti į šalį buvo atvartyti užsienio darbininkai. Prievarta buvo mobilizuoti lenkų darbininkai, daugiausia jauni ir iš ekonominiu požiūriu nepalankių regionų, tokių kaip Ciechanovas. Su šiais darbininkais buvo žiauriai elgiamasi, jiems buvo taikomi diskriminaciniai įstatymai, dažnai jie dirbo ir gyveno nesaugiomis sąlygomis. Straipsnyje aptariama lenkų darbininkų patirtis įvairiose pramonės šakose, įskaitant statybas ir žemės ūkį, ir analizuojami motyvai, dėl kurių jie bėgo nuo priverstinio darbo. Straipsnyje taip pat nagrinėjamas opus seksualinio smurto prieš lenkų darbininkes klausimas, kuris istoriografijoje dažniausiai lieka nepastebėtas. 1945 m. sovietų kariuomenei išvadavus Klaipėdą, priverstinis darbas regione baigėsi, tačiau daugelis darbininkų susidūrė su tolesniais sunkumais, įskaitant sovietų valdžios institucijų netinkamą elgesį. Straipsnio pabaigoje pateikiami apmąstymai apie pokario žalos atlyginimo procesą ir raginama tęsti mokslinius tyrimus bei tarpvalstybinį bendradarbiavimą, siekiant visapusiškai suprasti priverstinio darbo Klaipėdos regione istoriją ir jo ilgalaikį poveikį nukentėjusioms bendruomenėms.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Antrasis pasaulinis karas, priverstinis darbas Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais, lenkų darbininkas, gestapas, gestapas *Zichenau / Schröttersburg*, Klaipėda, *Memelgebiet* (Klaipėdos kraštas), Tautos atminties institutas