Forced Labour in Nazi Concentration Camps

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Today, Nazi concentration camps have become an international symbol for violence and terror in the modern world. This is partially due to photos taken by the Allies when they liberated the camps in 1945. Since then, Nazi concentration camps have become well-known as places where inmates were subjected to mass murder and extermination. This is also what is remembered by the public when thinking about camp labour, resulting in the memorable catchphrase of “extermination through work.” However, the question is whether the concentration camp system has been considered too much from its final phase, meaning the last months before the end of the war, and whether this catchphrase of “extermination through work” actually goes too far in implying premeditated intention.

The main focus of the following exploration is to survey the role of labour in the concentration camp system from 1933 to 1945. Here, an important resource is the large body of research devoted to at least the second half of the war, when camp labour acquired its greatest significance. Besides the many such relevant studies, there is also a broad range of primary source materials, thanks especially to the Nuremberg Trials, which required the compilation of extensive source materials. It particular, the concentration camp system played an essential role in the fourth of the Subsequent Nuremberg Trials, which focussed on the SS-WVHA or “Central Economic and Administrative Department of the SS.” There were also many other trials of personnel from almost every major concentration camp and their subcamps. Less research has been devoted to camp labour before 1941/42, and much less to the prewar period. There are no broader studies for this time, and the source materials are much more disparate.

This analysis will also look at connections to other forms of voluntary and involuntary labour within the Nazi system. The underlying thesis is that the use of camp labour needs to be considered within the system's overall labour deployment policies. Analysis will also consider how much this may have been specific to the Nazi state, which was closely intertwined with the special characteristics of the concentration camp system.
Concentration Camps Before the War

The concentration camps played a central role from the moment the Nazis took power, and they maintained their importance, albeit with evolving functions, until the fall of the Third Reich. Their establishment was based upon the “Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of People and State,” issued on 28 February 1933, commonly known as the “Reichstag Fire Decree.” This declared a civil state of emergency in the German Reich, enabling the detention of political opponents without trial.1 The Nazi leadership and local Nazi cadres used this decree to send political opponents to concentration camps, mainly targeting communists, social democrats and labour union activists. In the beginning, there were about one hundred concentration camps. Many of them were established in abandoned factories, prisons, workhouses, country estates, castles, schools, barracks, and even on a ship. The diversity of architecture was matched by the diversity of administrative structures. Camps were established by various organizations, including the ss, the SA, the Gestapo, and several local state ministries. They had one main goal in common: the consolidation of power through violence and terror. But in comparison to later concentration camps, these so-called “preventative detention camps” were not sites of routine killing, although murders certainly did take place. One of the first camps was established at Dachau, originally for the long-term imprisonment of political opponents, under the authority of Heinrich Himmler, who was head of the ss and also acting chief of police in Munich at the time; here, just 13 inmates were murdered from mid-April to the end of May in 1933.2 According to Nikolaus Wachsmann, between 150,000 and 200,000 people were subjected to temporary detention without trial in the year 1933.3

Starting in mid-1934, these “preventative detention camps” fell increasingly under the centralized control of the ss. In July of 1934, the camp commandant at Dachau, Theodor Eicke, was named head of the “Concentration Camp Inspectorate” by Himmler. Eicke had already established a system of discipline and punishment at Dachau in 1933 that would be emulated by all other

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1 An important aspect here was the concept of “Schutzhaft” (“preventative detention”), which was not mentioned within the decree itself, but which became a common reason for concentration camp imprisonment after April 1933. Martin Broszat, “Nationalsozialistische Konzentrationslager 1933–1945,” in idem./Hans-Adolf Jacobsen/Helmut Krausnick, eds., Anatomie des ss-Staates (Munich, 1967), vol. 2, 11–133, 13.
2 Wolfgang Benz/Barbara Distel, eds., Der Ort des Terrors (Munich, 2005), vol. 2, 235.