Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water: The Russian-Germans in the Labour Army

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ABSTRACT

During the Second World War, the Stalin regime forcibly mobilized most of the able bodied adult Russian-German population into forced labour detachments following their mass deportation from European areas of the USSR. The local military boards conscripted the Russian-Germans in a manner similar to the induction of men into the military. The NKO (People’s Commissariat of Defence) then turned the conscripts over to the NKVD (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs) or NKPS (People’s Commissariat of Transportation) for forced labour. Collectively these labour columns came to be known as the labour army or ‘trudarmiia’. Most of these men and women worked in GULag camps felling trees and building industrial complexes under legal and material conditions very similar to those of convicted prisoners. The rest worked for various civilian commissariats under NKVD and later MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) supervision. In particular a large number of mobilized Germans worked for the People’s Commissariat of Coal, the People’s Commissariat of Oil, and the People’s Commissariat of Munitions. This system of forced labour operated under extremely inhumane conditions. The men and women in the labour army lacked adequate food, shelter, clothing, and medical care. As a result tens of thousands died from malnutrition, disease, and exposure. The Soviet government only began to dismantle the labour army after the end of the Second World War. This dismantlement took place piecemeal over a number of years. The MVD reclassified most labour army conscripts as special settlers only in 1947-1948 and did not release some mobilized Germans until 1957. This article will cover the institutional development and operations of the labour army from 1941 until its liquidation. In particular it will look at the conscription of ethnic Germans in Kazakhstan and Central Asia into the labour army. It will also examine the changing legal status and material conditions suffered by the men and women in the labour army during this time. Finally, it will analyze the labour army as instrument of ethnic repression aimed specifically at Soviet citizens of German nationality.

Keywords: Russian-Germans, labour army, forced labour, GULag, NKVD
INTRODUCTION

‘Now therefore ye are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God.’

In the summer and fall of 1941 the Stalin regime forcibly deported the vast majority of the Russian-Germans living in the European areas of the USSR to Siberia and Kazakhstan. By January 1942 a total of 749,950 Russian-Germans had arrived in Kazakhstan and Siberia. Of these 349,536 had been sent to Kazakhstan and the remainder to Siberia. Here they joined 231,301 Russian-Germans that had already lived in these areas before 1941 including 61,271 in Kazakhstan. The Stalin regime subjected both those deported and those already living in these areas to mobilization into the labour army starting in January 1942. The labour army consisted of a variety of work columns and detachments mobilized by the Soviet government from among its Russian-German population and small number of people belonging to other stigmatized nationalities during the Second World War. In total the Stalin regime forcibly mobilized over 316,000 Russian-Germans into the labour army from 1941 to 1946. This represented almost all the able bodied adult Russian-Germans still living under Soviet rule at this time. The majority of these forced labourers, 182,000 worked in ITLs (Corrective Labour Camps) run by GULag (Main Administration of Corrective Labour Camps) where they lived and toiled under conditions very similar to those of convicted prisoners. They, however, did not appear in the GULag records as inmates. The NKVD kept a separate set of records on the conscripts in the labour army. The remaining 133,000 worked in civilian commissariats under NKVD supervision.

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1 Joshua 9:23, King James Bible (Cambridge Edition).
3 Ibid., doc. 173, pp. 251-253.
4 Ibid., p. 11.
Soviet government mobilized over a quarter of this work force, at least 85,735 of these men and women, from Kazakhstan. Including the non-Germans such as Koreans, Kalmyks, Crimean Tatars, Finns, and others conscripted among other deported peoples into the labour army brings the number of such forced labourers up to 400,000 of which 220,000 worked in camps and construction sites of the NKVD and 180,000 for civilian commissariats. The ethnic nature of the labour army distinguished it from other forms of forced labour in the USSR. The Russian-Germans and other stigmatized groups conscripted into its ranks can in no way be compared to free citizens inducted for work industry during the Second World War. They suffered extreme restrictions on their civil rights and material conditions of life. As a result their experience during the war has far more in common with that of convicted prisoners than with conscripted industrial workers from Central Asian nationalities.

RECENT RUSSIAN LANGUAGE RESEARCH ON THE LABOUR ARMY

Scholarly research on the labour army is fairly recent. Until the late 1980s it was not possible to investigate and publish on the subject in the USSR. The relevant archival documents remained inaccessible until this time and before Gorbachev’s institution of the policy of Glasnost it was not possible to conduct oral history on the subject in the USSR either. Due to the partial opening of Soviet archives in the 1990s there has been a considerable amount of material written on the subject in Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Germany in the last two decades. Unfortunately, the archives are far less open today than they were in the 1990s. For instance, all of the documents dealing with any aspect of Stalinist repression including the labour army at the TsGAKR (Central State Archives of the Kyrgyz Republic) have been reclassified as secret or top secret and are no longer accessible. Nevertheless, scholars in Russia in particular have continued to publish new work on the subject of the labour army.

It is not possible in a short article like this to cover the entire historiography of the labour army. Rather I shall aim to provide a brief description in this section of the major sources I used in compiling this article. I have not listed every source I cited in the article in this section, only the most important. Those sources, particularly primary ones that are cited numerous times

8 A.A. German and A.N. Kurochkin, Nemtsy SSSR v trudovoi armii (1941-1945) (Moscow: Gotika, 1998), table 5, p. 67.
11 Ibid., p. 629.
throughout the article are listed in the review below. Other sources are listed only in the footnotes.

The published scholarship on the labour army consists mostly of document collections dealing with the various peoples deported by Stalin during the Second World War, particularly the Russian-Germans and book chapters from conference proceedings. In this first category there is one document collection devoted primarily to Russian-Germans mobilized in the labour army. N.F. Bugai, (ed.), “Mobilizovat’ nemtsev v rabochie kolonny ...I. Stalin”: Sbornik dokumentov (1940-e gody)(Moscow: Gotika, 1998) reproduces a large number of documents from the various central archives in Moscow about the mobilization of ethnic Germans into the labour army. These documents describe the administrative regulations of the labour army, its economic tasks, and its geographic distribution among other things. This collection provides a strong documentary skeleton for the institutional development and changes of the labour army.

In addition to the central archives in Moscow there is a lot of material on the labour army in republican and regional archives. Some of this material has been published. G.A. Karpykova, (ed.), Iz istorii nemtsev Kazakhstana (1921-1975 gg.). Sbornik dokumentov: Arkhiv Presidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan (Almaty: Gotika, 1997) has a significant number of useful documents on the mobilization and distribution of the labour army as it relates to Kazakhstan.

V.A. Berdinskikh, Spetsponselentsy: Politcheskaia ssylka narodov Sovetskoi Rossii (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2005) is not a document collection per se since it is structured around narrative text written by the author. But, it does reproduce a very large number of archival documents both from the central archives in Moscow and more interestingly from the local archives in Kirov Oblast dealing with Viatlag. Unusual among Russian language scholarship which tends to focus on documents from the central archives in Moscow or republic capitals like Almaty, this book contains a number of personal files of labour army conscripts as well as the records of Communist Party meetings in the camp.

The number of full length monographs devoted specifically to the labour army is quite limited. The short book by A.A. German and A.N. Kurochkin, Nemtsy SSSR v trudovoi armii (1941-1945) (Moscow: Gotika, 1998) sticks out as one of the few scholarly monographs examining the formation of the labour army and the experiences of the men and women in it as its main subject matter. This short book provides the best single narrative description of the labour army as a whole. Its institutional focus, however, is not on so much on the structures of the system or the political actions that governed its creation and administration. Rather the book focuses on the lives of the men and women in the labour army and how they experienced and reacted to the conditions imposed upon them.

Most of the labour camps absorbing men from the labour army as a work force were located in the Urals. It is thus not surprising that a great deal of the scholarship on Russian-Germans in the labour army comes from scholars based at institutions in the Urals. This is
particularly true regarding recent conference publications. Two works recently published as conference papers by scholars working in the Urals are V.M. Kirillov and N.V. Matveeva, “Trudmobilizovannye nemtsy na Urale: sostoianie i novie aspekti isseldovanniia problemy” and S.L. Razinkov, “Sotsial’nyi portret trudarmiteitsev, mobilizovannykh v lageria NKVD na Urale v 1941-1946.” All three of these scholars are at the State Social-Pedagogical Academy of Nizhni Tagil and the two pieces are published in A.A. German, (ed.), Nachal’nyi period Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny i deportatsiia rossiiskikh nemtsev: vzgliady i otsenki cherez 70 let (Moscow: MSNK Press, 2011). This volume is one in long series of published conference papers in Russian dealing with various aspects of the history of the Russian-Germans.

MOBILIZATION

The mobilization of ethnic Germans with Soviet citizenship into the labour army took place as a result of seven major decrees between 1941 and 1943. The first inductions began on 31 August 1941, near the start of the deportations. On this date the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union issued a resolution calling for the arrest of all anti-Soviet elements among ethnic Germans in Ukraine and the mobilization of men aged 16-60 into construction battalions. The resolution assigned the mobilization to the NKO and instructed them to turn the conscripts over to the NKVD for use as construction battalions in eastern regions of the USSR.12

The NKVD arrested 548 ‘anti-Soviet’ ethnic Germans including a 100 women living in Ukraine during September 1941 and incarcerated them in the prison located at Voroshilovgrad (Lugansk) before transferring them to Viatlag in Kirov Oblast. On 20 October 1941, they arrived in Viatlag. This contingent suffered extremely high mortality rates due to hunger, cold, and illness. In the winter of 1941-1942 alone 263 or 48 per cent of them perished from these causes. In total 384 of these men or women or 70 per cent perished in Viatlag.13 High mortality rates due to malnutrition, exposure, and disease continued throughout World War II for both prisoners and labour army conscripts in Viatlag and other Soviet labour camps.

The mobilized Germans from Ukraine were considerably more numerous. By 3 September 1941, the NKVD reported that 18,600 had been mobilized.14 The NKVD ordered the reorganization these construction battalions into work columns on 26 September 1941.15

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14 Bugai (ed.), ‘Mobilizovat’ nemtsev v rabochie kolonny ...I. Stalin’: Sbornik dokumentov (1940-e gody), doc. 28, p. 52.

15 Ibid., doc. 30, p. 53.
Bogoslovlag received 4,864 of these men. The success of this mobilization was of course limited due to the rapid advance of the German military in Ukraine. Later mobilizations of Russian-German civilians into labour columns were much more successful due to the fact that they all took place in Kazakhstan and Siberia far away from the front lines of the war.

**TRANSFERS FROM THE MILITARY**

The next wave of conscripts into the labour army came from Russian-German men expelled from the ranks of the Soviet military. Already in July 1941 many military commanders had interpreted Directive No. 002367 of 30 June 1941 on expelling untrustworthy elements in a way that discriminated against ethnic Germans. In the same month the Soviet government ordered the removal of ethnic Germans from all positions of responsible authority. In the military this included machine gunners, those armed with automatic rifles, snipers, radio operators, scouts, mortar operators, and artillery commanders. They were largely confined to regular infantry duties as riflemen and porters. On 8 September 1941, Stalin issued a directive as People’s Commissar of Defence to remove all ethnic Germans from the all Soviet military units, academies, and institutions to be implemented no later than 15 September 1941. It ordered the ethnic German personnel removed from the military to be transferred to construction battalions in the interior of the USSR. This decree stated that military commanders needed special permission from the NKO to keep any servicemen of German nationality in their units. On 11 September 1941, the command of the 14th Army issued a decree to implement this order within its ranks. Among the Russian-German soldiers sent to construction battalions were 1,248 in six battalions in Kirov Oblast, 748 in Molotov Oblast, and 1,689 in two battalions in the Udmurt ASSR. These construction battalions joined with those mobilized from Ukraine to form the core of the labour army. The flow of soldiers from the Red Army into construction battalions in the interior of the USSR began in 1941, but continued in 1942. Bogoslovlag received 6,247 demobilized ethnic German soldiers from the labour army in 1941 and another 71 demobilized in

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19 Ibid, doc. 8.2.4, pp. 253-254.
20 German and Kurochkin, Nemtsy SSSR v trudovoi armii (1941-1945), p. 49.
1942. Tagillag received 495 demobilized Russian-Germans in 1942. Eventually by the end of 1942 the vast majority of Russian-Germans in the Soviet military, over 33,000 men had been removed and sent to work in the labour army. Close to one tenth the total labour army consisted of men removed from the military not withstanding their loyal service in the early days of the war against Nazi Germany. The waste of assigning trained soldiers to heavy menial labour would later be repeated with the assignment of the educated Russian-German elite to the same work.

The NKVD reorganized these construction battalions as work columns in the fall of 1941. GKO order 660-ss of 11 September 1941 and NKVD prikaz 001388 of 26 September 1941. These orders transferred responsibility for the supply and organization of these men to GULag. On 25 October 1942 the heads of Kimpersai, Ivel, Bogoslov, and Solikamsk labour camps received instructions regarding these work columns. These men were at this time classified as ‘voluntary workers’ and received corresponding rations for fulfilling their work norms. These rations included 1200 grams of meat, 800 grams of fish, 750 grams of fat, 2000 grams of cereal a month, plus sugar, bread, and sweets. It is at this time that these men became subject to a separate special count administratively distinguishing them from all other categories of workers in the camps. On 20 November 1941, Deputy GULag Chief Zavgorodnii issued an explanation of the status of these work battalions to the heads of the various camps with such detachments. This clarification brought the status of these ‘voluntary’ workers much closer to that of prisoners. While they still received the rations allocated to ‘voluntary’ workers, the NKVD greatly restricted their freedom of movement. The workers were performing mandatory ‘military’ service and did not have the right to voluntarily leave their work columns. They were to be housed in barracks and subject to the internal order of the GULag camps. They could not be transferred to institutions other than GULag without the permission of the Deputy Chief of GULag. Finally, they received special ID cards marking their status as members of construction battalions. The legal and material conditions of the men and later women in the labour army would continue to deteriorate in subsequent months until they became almost indistinguishable from that of prisoners.

23 Berdinskikh, Spetsposelentsy politicheskaia sylka narodov Sovetskoi Rossii, pp. 323-324.
25 Ibid., doc. 30, p. 53.
26 Ibid., doc. 31, pp. 53-55.
27 Ibid., doc. 32, pp. 55-56.
The total number of Russian-Germans mobilized into the labour army during the fall of 1941 remained relatively small compared to the massive inductions of 1942. The labour army numbered only 20,800 men aged 16-55 by January 1942. The NKVD had assigned 2,300 to Kimpersei (Aktuubinsk) in Kazakhstan, 6,200 to Bogoslovlag, 9,800 Solikamsklag, and 2,500 to Ivdellag. These men mobilized from Ukraine or transferred from the Red Army represented the core of a new form of forced labour in the USSR that greatly expanded in the next few months.

**MASS CONSCRIPTION OF RUSSIAN-GERMAN CIVILIANS INTO THE LABOUR ARMY**

The initial core of the labour army came about as a result of rapidly removing able bodied German men in Ukraine from the reaches of the *Wehrmacht* and purging the Soviet military of ethnic Germans. But, the largest contingents came from the conscription of Russian-Germans either deported to Siberia or Kazakhstan or already living in these regions before 1941. The mass induction of deported Russian-Germans had two purposes. The first reason behind the mobilization was to eliminate the potentially explosive social tensions that had resulted from the massive deportation of a now completely impoverished mass of ethnic Germans into areas populated by Russians and Kazakhs. It was not legally or physically possible to subject a large enough portion of the Russian-German population to arrest to eliminate these tensions. The second reason was to make use of the population as a source of forced labour. The mass mobilization of ethnic Germans bypassed Soviet legal norms and condemned hundreds of thousands of men and women to forced labour without any formal charges or trials based solely upon their ethnic ancestry. The creation of an institution of forced labour aimed primarily at one specific nationality thus had racist undertones which were reinforced by policies physically segregating the labour army from people of non-German nationality. The labour army thus became an instrument of ethnically based repression against Russian-Germans on a mass scale.

On 2 January 1942, the Soviet government began the preliminary work of conscripting tens of thousands of Russian-German men into forced labour columns. On this date the deputy head of the NKVD, Chernyshov issued two reports. The first one was a census of the number of Russian-German men aged 16-55 deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan. It placed this number at

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31 Ibid., p. 151.
152,558 of which over half 85,280 were in Kazakhstan. It further noted that the number of able bodied men aged 17 to 50 was probably around 125,000 to 130,000.\textsuperscript{32} The second document was an inventory of labour camps and approximately how many mobilized ethnic Germans each one of them could accommodate. It included a list of five existing labour camps devoted to logging in the Urals and Siberia, a possible new logging camp in Novosibirsk, and three industrial construction projects. In total it called for 79,000-80,000 men to work in the logging camps and 40,000 to work building the Bakal, Bogoslov, and Solikamsk factories in the Urals.\textsuperscript{33} The Soviet government thus set a quota for conscription of Russian-Germans into the labour army of 120,000. A full 68,000 of these men were to come from deportees to Kazakhstan of which 30,000 were to be sent to Bakalstroi, 25,000 on NKPS rail projects, and 12,000 to Sevurallag.\textsuperscript{34} A little over a week later Stalin personally ordered that these men be mobilized and sent to work felling trees, building industrial factories, and laying rail lines.

The same day the Deputy Chief of the NKVD, Kruglov issued new instructions on the order, structure, and discipline of Russian-Germans mobilized into work columns. This document moved the position of conscripts in the labour army considerably towards that of convicted prisoners. The guarding, discipline, and work norms of the labour army now did not differ all substantially from that of GULag prisoners. Among other restrictions the barracks of the labour army were now to be surrounded by a restricted zone with armed guards. Movement in and out of the zone was strictly supervised to prevent labour army conscripts from escaping. It established a series of administrative punishments for violations of discipline, attempted escapes, and failure to fulfil work norms. Labour army conscripts became subject to fines and solitary confinement. This latter punishment could last up to ten days and involved the conscripts sleeping on an uncovered floor. During solitary confinement the conscript could only leave his cell for 30 minutes a day of exercise under the supervision of armed guards. Special boards with the power to impose punishments up to the death penalty dealt with all serious or persistent offenses. This document also established a minimum 10 hour a day work day with only one day off every ten days or three days a month.\textsuperscript{35} The labour army had come to resemble the rest of the GULag in its basic essentials. It was a heavily guarded and disciplined institution devoted to long hours of physically demanding work.

The first mass conscription of Russian-Germans into the ranks of the labour army started on 10 January 1942. On this day Stalin issued GKO order no. 1123ss ordering the mobilization of 120,000 Russian-German men between the ages of 17 and 50 who had been deported to Kazakhstan and Siberia. This decree called for the mobilization of 45,000 ethnic German men to work in felling trees, 35,000 for the construction of the Bakal and Bogoslov complexes, and

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\textsuperscript{32} Bugai (ed.), ‘Mobilizovat’ nemtsev v rabochie kolonny ...I. Stalin’: Sbornik dokumentov (1940-e gody), doc. 33, pp. 56-57.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., doc. 34, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., doc. 35, pp. 48-59.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., doc. 80, pp. 114-117.
\end{footnotesize}
40,000 for building rail lines. The logging and industrial construction workers fell under the supervision of the NKVD while the rail construction came under the purview of the NKPS. The mobilization was to begin immediately and finish within 20 days. The decree required all German men receiving an induction notice to appear at NKO collection points with winter clothes, linen, bedding, a mug, a spoon, and a ten day supply of food. The NKPS then had until 10 February 1942 to deliver these men to their assigned places of work where either the NKVD or NKPS would organize them into work columns and detachments under strict discipline with mandatory work quotas. Failure to show up to the induction points, violation of work column discipline, refusal to work, and desertion all came under the jurisdiction of special boards of the NKVD who could impose harsh punishments including the death penalty. The decree set food rations and other supplies for the mobilized Germans according to GULag norms. The legal basis for the massive induction of Russian-German men into GULag camps to work under conditions almost identical to convicted prisoners had now been established.

MOBILIZATION OF LOCAL RUSSIAN-GERMANS INTO THE LABOUR ARMY

This first mass mobilization fell short of its goal. It failed to conscript 80,000 deported Russian-German men to work in the logging camps and NKVD constructions sites in the Urals. The Soviet government only managed to conscript 67,961 men during this first induction. In particular the number of workers sent to Bakalstroi fell short of the original goal by 30,000 men. They only managed to send 11,722 men to work on the construction of the industrial complex. They also only managed to mobilize 25,000 Russian-German men out of the originally planned 40,000 for work on NKPS projects. They thus only conscripted 92,961 men out of the 120,000 in the plan, a shortfall of nearly 30,000. The failure to meet the goal of this mobilization had several causes. Among them were men avoiding showing up to induction points, failure of men to pass the medical exam due to illness, lack of warm clothes and claims by local authorities that the conscripts were irreplaceable workers. It thus became necessary to conduct a second wave of inductions into the labour army and expand the pool of potential conscripts.

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36 Ibid., doc. 18, pp. 39-40.
37 Ibid., doc. 47, pp. 70-71.
38 Ibid., doc. 35, pp. 58-59.
39 Ibid., doc. 47, pp. 70-71.
40 German and Kurochkin, Nemtsy SSSR v trudovoi armii (1941-1945), pp. 55-56.
The Soviet government had limited the first mass conscription to Russian-German men deported to Krasnoiarsk and Altai krais, Novosibirsk and Omsk oblasts, and Kazakhstan. It did not include Russian-Germans deported elsewhere or Russian-Germans living in these territories before 1941. A preliminary count by the NKVD showed 25,123 Russian-German men aged 17-50 outside of Siberia that could be mobilized. This included 8,161 men who had been resident in Kazakhstan before the deportations. A count of Russian-German men aged 17-50 living in Siberia before the deportations found another 22,935 potential conscripts. A revised count of Russian-German men aged 17-50 outside of Siberia reported by the NKVD on 1 March 1942 counted 30,983 men including 10,255 in Kazakhstan and 5,546 in Central Asia proper. The combined figures for local Siberian Germans and those living in other eastern regions of the USSR thus reached 53,918 potential conscripts that could be added to the labour army.

Then next mass conscription of Russian-Germans into the labour army began in February 1942. GKO Order no. 1281ss of 14 February 1942 ordered the mobilization of all able bodied Russian-German men between 17 and 50 who had already been living in eastern regions of the USSR prior to the deportations. This decree closely resembled the early decree of 10 January 1942. The NKVD and NKO had until 25 March 1942 to complete this mobilization and the NKPS had until 30 March 1942 to deliver these new conscripts to their assigned places of work. By April 1942, the Soviet government had conscripted an additional 40,864 Russian-German men living in eastern regions of the USSR before 1941 to work in the labour army. The Stalin regime sent local Russian-Germans from Kazakhstan and Central Asia to work on the South Ural Railway and in Baka

Mobilization of Russian-German Men and Women Into Civilian Commissariats

The largest wave of conscriptions into the labour army came on 7 October 1942 with GKO Order 2383ss. This decree expanded the pool of Russian-Germans eligible for induction into the labour army to men ages 15-16 and 51-55 and women ages 16-45 who were not pregnant and did not have children under three years old. Women with children over three years of age were required to leave their children with family members, close relatives, or German kolkhoz workers. The

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43 Ibid, doc. 40, p. 64.
44 Ibid., doc. 42, pp. 66-67.
46 Ibid., doc. 47, pp. 70-71.
47 German, ‘Mobilizovannye sovetskie nemtsy v lageriakh NKVD i na khoziaistvennykh ob’ektakh drugikh narkomatov v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny’, p. 172.
mobilization was to begin immediately and be completed within a month. The men mobilized under this decree were initially assigned to work for People’s Commissariat or Coal at ‘Cheliabugol’ and ‘Karagandaugol’ while the women assigned to the People’s Commissariat of Oil.\(^\text{48}\) This wave of induction resulted in the conscription of 70,780 men and 52,742 women into the labour army for a total of 123,522 people.\(^\text{49}\) Kazakhstan contributed 9,642 German men and 9,250 women to the labour army from 7 October to 3 December 1942.\(^\text{50}\) By December 1942 the total number of Russian-Germans mobilized into the labour army from Kazakhstan had reached 57,695 people.\(^\text{51}\) In addition to the men and women mobilized from Kazakhstan this decree also conscripted 455 Russian-German men from Uzbekistan to work in the coal industry in the Kuzbass.\(^\text{52}\) Finally, it mobilized 397 Russian-German women and 169 Russian-German men from Turkmenistan.\(^\text{53}\) The massive induction of Russian-Germans into the labour army during the fall of 1942 brought the total labour army population up to 216,351 by 1 July 1943 despite massive deaths in the winter of 1941-1943. The labour army on this date was divided between 104,276 men and women in NKVD labour camps and 112,075 in civilian commissariats.\(^\text{54}\) This induction almost exhausted the available man power of the Russian-Germans. Later waves of induction were on a much smaller scale.

**MOBILIZING OTHER NATIONALITIES INTO THE LABOUR ARMY**

Although the Stalin regime inducted other ‘enemy’ and ‘unreliable’ nationalities into the labour army their numbers were much smaller and in no other case did they conscript women from these nationalities. They also did not conscript adolescents younger than 17 or men older than 50 from these nationalities. On 14 October 1942, the Soviet government issued GKO Order 2409ss conscripting able bodied men ages 17 to 50 of Romanian, Hungarian, Finnish, and Italian nationalities.\(^\text{55}\) The largest of these nationalities after the Germans were the Finns. But, even their numbers were relatively very small compared to the ethnic Germans in the labour army. The labour army conscripts into Tagillag were 97.1 per cent German versus one per cent Finns. A similar dynamic existed in Bogoslovlag where Germans were 98.9 per cent of the conscripts versus 0.1 per cent Finns. Only in Bakalstroi did nationalities other than German have any

\(^{48}\)Bugai (ed.), *Mobilizovat’ nemtsev v rabochie kolonny ...I. Stalin’: Sbornik dokumentov (1940-e gody),* doc. 21, pp. 43-44.


\(^{50}\)Karpykova (ed.), *Iz istorii nemtsev Kazakhstana (1921-1975 gg.). Sbornik Dokumentov: Arkhiv Prezidenta Respuliki Kazakhstan,* doc. 74, pp. 131-133.

\(^{51}\)Ibid., doc. 76, pp. 135-136.

\(^{52}\)Bugai (ed.), *Mobilizovat’ nemtsev v rabochie kolonny ...I. Stalin’: Sbornik dokumentov (1940-e gody),* doc. 183, pp. 259-260.

\(^{53}\)Ibid., doc. 217, pp. 288-289.

\(^{54}\)German and Kurochkin, *Nemtsy SSSR v trudovoi armii (1941-1945)*, table 5, p. 67.

\(^{55}\)Bugai (ed.), *Mobilizovat’ nemtsev v rabochie kolonny ...I. Stalin’: Sbornik dokumentov (1940-e gody),* doc. 22, pp. 44-45.
notable presence. Here Germans were 86.9 per cent and Finns 4.6 per cent. The number of Soviet citizens of Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian nationality inducted into the labour army remained very limited.

Later during the war, the Soviet government inducted a limited number of ethnic Koreans, Kalmyks, and Crimean Tatars into the labour army, again all of them men. In March 1943 alone, the Stalin regime mobilized 7,765 Russian-Koreans into work columns in the labour army. Most of these men, 5,135 worked in the Tula coal basin. Another 2,622 worked in coal mining in the Karaganda mines of Kazakhstan. Still others worked in various construction and industrial sites in Uzbekistan. Another 1,500 Koreans worked in the labour army in the Ukhta camp in the Komi ASSR during the Second World War. Following their deportation from their homeland on the Caspian Sea to Siberia in late 1943, the Stalin regime demobilized a number of Kalmyk soldiers from the Red Army and sent them to work in the labour army at Shirokolag building a hydro electric station. Finally, the Stalin regime sent a number of Crimean Tatar men to work in the labour army at the same time it deported the rest of the population to special settlements in Uzbekistan and the Urals in May 1944. At the time of the deportation, 18-20 May 1944, the Soviet government forcibly mobilized 5,000 Crimean Tatar men to work in the labour army mining coal in the region around Moscow. Despite these additional mobilizations the labour army remained predominantly an institution devoted to the mass punishment of ethnic Germans through the use of forced labour. All the other nationalities combined made up at most around a fifth of the total number of people conscripted into the labour army.

FINAL MOBILIZATIONS

In 1943 there were two more small waves of conscription into the labour army. On 29 March 1943, the GKO issued order 3095 calling for the mobilization of another 3,700 German women from Kazakhstan to work in cellulose-paper factories in Archangel’sk, Solikamsk, and Kamsk. On 19 August 1943, there was another small induction of Russian-German men and

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58 Ibid., p. 316.
women into the labour army. GKO resolution 3960ss on this date called for the mobilization of 7,000 Russian-Germans living in Kazakhstan and Siberia into the coal industry.\(^{62}\) On 25 August 1943, the head of GULag NKVD Nasedkin, noted that this mobilization had been expanded from the original 7,000 to 15,000 Russian-Germans. Nasedkin marked a full 6,000 of these additional ethnic Germans for work in the coal mines of Vorkuta beyond the Arctic Circle. The other 2,000 he reserved for the tank industry. The conscripts consisted of 3,000 men from Kazakhstan, 2,200 men from Siberia, 5,500 women from Kazakhstan, and 4,300 women from Siberia.\(^{63}\) Before 1944, 1,652 of these conscripts ended up in Tagillag.\(^{64}\) In contrast 5,361 men and 1,512 women inducted under this order ended up in the Vorkuta camp complex by this time.\(^{65}\) There were no more large scale waves of conscription into the labour army after 1943.

**MATERIAL CONDITIONS AND DEATHS IN THE LABOUR ARMY**

The Russian-Germans conscripted into the labour army suffered from a lack of proper housing, winter clothing, bedding, shoes, adequate nutrition, and medical care. Already on 2 March 1942, the NKVD reported that the majority of Russian-German labour army conscripts arriving in their assigned camps had no bedding, winter clothes, and shoes.\(^{66}\) They lived in barracks and dugouts unsuitable for winter habitation.\(^{67}\) As a result of overcrowded and unsanitary barracks and lack of food the conscripts in the labour army suffered from epidemics of acute typhus, scabies, and inflammation of the lungs. In some camps during the fall and winter 1942 rations consisted of only 300 grams of bread a day. But, sometimes the labour conscripts would go 3-5 days without bread.\(^{68}\) On 25 October 1942, the maximum rations for labour army conscripts no matter how much they over fulfilled their work quotas was set at 800 grams of bread, 50 grams of fish, 20 grams of meat, 10 grams of fat, and 400 grams of vegetables and potatoes a day.\(^{69}\) The vast majority of labour army conscripts, however, got nowhere near this amount of food and suffered predictable results. Dominick Hollmann wrote in his journal in 1942 while in the labour army:

> Every morning some of the men reported sick with diarrhoea, caused by bad food and unsanitary conditions. Many had scurvy from lack of vegetables, legs swollen, entire

\(^{62}\) Ibid., doc. 25, pp. 47-48.  
\(^{63}\) Ibid., doc. 27, p. 50.  
\(^{64}\) Kirillov and Razinkov, ‘Sovetskie nemtsy – trudarmeistsy Tagillaga (1942-1946 gg.)’, table 2, p. 151.  
\(^{66}\) Bugai (ed.), ‘Mobilizovat’ nemtsev v rabochie kolonny ...I. Stalin’: Sbornik dokumentov (1940-e gody), doc. 83, p. 119.  
\(^{67}\) Ibid., doc. 153, pp. 232-233.  
\(^{68}\) Ibid., doc. 142, pp. 224-225.  
\(^{69}\) German and Kurochkin, Nemtsy SSSR v trudovoi armii (1941-1945), p. 111.
body covered with sores. Many were weak and wasting away from starvation and disease. Men who previously weighed 80 or 90 kilograms were down to forty or forty-five.\textsuperscript{70}

Indeed the labour army conscripts suffered from famine like conditions during the winter of 1942 and 1943. Felix Littau a survivor of the labour army detachment at Bakalstroi noted that he only managed to survive because he was small and did not need much food to live, but that all of the larger men around him died quickly from hunger.\textsuperscript{71} This hunger weakened the immune systems of the men and women in the labour army and made them more susceptible to disease. Pellagra and tuberculosis ravaged the labour army conscripts as well as emaciation from lack of food.\textsuperscript{72} As late as August 1944, deaths from hunger related causes were still being reported regularly among labour army conscripts by the NKVD.\textsuperscript{73} Everything needed for human survival remained in critical short supply in the labour army. The result was that a very large minority of them perished as a direct result of these poor material conditions.

The horrific material conditions suffered by men and women in the labour army led to massive mortality. Malnutrition, disease, exposure, and accidents led to premature deaths on a daily basis. The recorded figures for deaths in the camps and at civilian commissariats are incomplete. But, some data does exist on this matter. In the camps recorded labour army deaths for 1942 totalled 11,874 people 10.6 per cent of the population.\textsuperscript{74} The following year, 1943 witnessed an official death toll of 11,561 people or 6.9 per cent of the total contingent that year.\textsuperscript{75} In 1944 the recorded number of labour army conscripts to perish in camps was only 2,832 people 2.5 per cent. In addition another 7,577 ethnic Germans in the labour army died while working for the civilian commissariats of coal, oil, and munitions during these years.\textsuperscript{76} There is no data available as of yet for 1945.\textsuperscript{77} Thus the total recorded number of deaths among Russian-Germans in the labour army from 1942-1944 is 31,012 or 9.8 per cent of the 316,000 men and women counted as mobilized during these years.


\textsuperscript{71} Interview with Felix Littau on 14 November 2010 in Kant, Kyrgyz Republic.

\textsuperscript{72} Bugai (ed.), \textit{‘Mobilizovat’ nemtsev v rabochie kolonny …I. Stalin’: Sbornik dokumentov (1940-e gody)}, doc. 244, p. 315.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, doc. 157, p. 235.

\textsuperscript{74} German and Kurochkin, \textit{Nemtsy SSSR v trudovoi armii (1941-1945)}, table 9, p. 114.

\textsuperscript{75} Kirillov and Matveeva, ‘Trudmobilizovannye nemtsy na Urale: sostoianie i novye aspekty issledovaniia problemy’, table 5, p. 655.

\textsuperscript{76} German and Kurochkin, \textit{Nemtsy SSSR v trudovoi armii (1941-1945)}, p. 114.

\textsuperscript{77} Kirillov and Matveeva, ‘Trudmobilizovannye nemtsy na Urale: sostoianie i novye aspekty issledovaniia problemy’, 636.
Not captured in any of these numbers is the very large number of men and women who died of emaciation and disease shortly after their release due to the poor material conditions in the camps. Starting in 1930 it became official Soviet policy to release inmates close to death from labour camps to die at somebody else’s expense.78 The Stalin regime also applied this policy to the labour army where it demobilized tens of thousands of men and women as invalids.79 For instance Viktor Krieger estimates that the majority of the 8,073 Russian-Germans demobilized from the labour army as invalids during 1942 died shortly thereafter.80 Thus the reasonable estimates of the number of Russian-Germans to die as a direct result of having worked in the labour army is estimated by historians to be at least around double the total recorded deaths listed above. A.A. German estimates the total number of deaths to be in excess of 60,000.81 Viktor Krieger places the number at over 70,000.82 While Alfred Eisfeld puts it considerably higher at more than 100,000 or almost one out of every three Russian-Germans conscripted into the labour army.83 The exact number of deaths resulting from hunger, disease, exhaustion, exposure and other causes related to working in the labour army will never be known. But, it is probably somewhere between twenty and thirty percent of the total contingent, a much higher proportion than the overall losses of the USSR during the Second World War. There can be no doubt that the high mortality rate suffered in the labour army represented a traumatic loss for the group as a whole.

END OF THE LABOUR ARMY

The Stalin regime dismantled the labour army only after World War II. Officially the Soviet government liquidated the labour army in the winter of 1945-1946 in a piecemeal fashion. This was done one industrial sector at a time. The guarded zone was eliminated and the labour army contingents converted into either industrial workers permanently attached to their places of work

79 Bugai (ed.), ‘Mobilizovat’ nemtsev v rabochie kolonny ...I. Stalin’: Sbornik dokumentov (1940-e gody), doc. 244, p. 315.
or special settlers. 84 For instance on 8 January 1945, the labour army was abolished in the oil industry. 85 However, most labour army conscripts were not in fact released from the specific restrictions of the labour army until 1948. 86 This is the year Littau says he was released from the labour army as well. 87). So despite a number of decrees from the Soviet government declaring the abolition of the labour army in 1945 and 1946 it is clear that it existed considerably longer. Most conscripts were not released until 1948 and some remained under these restrictions up until 1957. 88 (Eisfeld 2003, p. 8). By 1958 the labour army as an institution had ceased to exist even if its trauma would continue to haunt the Russian-Germans for decades to come.

CONCLUSION

The labour army represented a branch of Soviet forced labour that served as an instrument of ethnic repression against Soviet citizens of German nationality. It did this by bypassing the legal protections that existed in the USSR requiring individual charges and trials and prohibited discrimination on the basis of nationality. Instead the Stalin regime forcibly conscripted most of the able bodied adult Russian-German population into a system of forced labour under the false pretext of calling it ‘alternative military service.’ Although the labour army only existed for a short period of time its inhumane conditions killed tens of thousands of Russian-Germans and traumatized the ethnic group for decades after the end of the Second World War.

87 Interview with Felix Littau on 14 November 2010 in Kant, Kyrgyz Republic.