

Nazi Forced Labor in Linz under the “Reichswerke Hermann Göring AG Berlin” 1938-1945

Aims of the activity/of the project

The aim of this project was to disclose and scientifically process findings on forced labor during National Socialism (also in the form of scientific publications), against the backdrop of the company history of voestalpine, and to gain access to sources regardless of the juridical-political debate of that time. At this, all accessible sources were evaluated, no topic was omitted and a comprehensive analysis of living and working conditions of forced laborers and slave workers was conducted, without letting their individual life stories vanish in the anonymity of analytic-empirical historiography.

Persons responsible for the project

Team leader: Univ.-Prof. DDr. Oliver Rathkolb (University of Vienna, Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies, Head of the Department of Contemporary History)

Interdisciplinary team:

Contemporary historians (Christian Gonsa, Gabriella Hauch, Michael John, Bertrand Perz)

Economists (Josef Moser)

Psychologists (Karl Fallend)

Cooperation partners

The project was commissioned by voestalpine.

Project description

International discussion on the subject of compensation for forced labor under the Nazis began after the first of a series of collective law suits filed by lawyers in the USA. There was massive pressure on Austrian companies in general, and specifically on the voestalpine as the successor of the Nazi company “Reichswerke Hermann Göring AG Berlin” in Linz, to reimburse former forced laborers and slave workers from the concentration camp Mauthausen. In 1998, top management at the voestalpine, general director Peter Strahammer and board director Wolfgang Eder, decided to commission an independent scientific project, apart from the legal debates.

The project (runtime 2 years) was conducted by a team of scientists from the fields of female and gender history, economy and social history, contemporary history and psychology. Oliver Rathkolb had an independent mandate for this project and thus, was responsible for the project; all other team members had contracts with him so that the company was unable to influence the scientific work.

The project’s primary objective was to secure sources from the company. On the basis of wage records of former forced laborers, it was possible to empirically substantiate the hierarchy of exploitation. For example, there were distinct differences between Croatians, who collaborated with the Nazi regime, and Serbian prisoners of war.

The starting point was the company voestalpine, and in a next step the research focus was broadened in order to include international forced labor history into the analyses (e.g. research in Poland, Belarus and Ukraine). In addition, numerous external archives (e.g., in Berlin and Moscow) were consulted to retrace the fate of forced laborers past 1945, during repatriation (e.g., to the

Soviet Union). The persons affected sustained a secondary persecution as “traitors”, resulting in multiple traumas.

Moreover, the psychologist Karl Fallend conducted autobiographical interviews with surviving forced laborers and slave workers.

Results/Impact

The results of the project were published in two volumes:

1. Volume: Biographical conversations (Karl Fallend)
2. Volume: Historical analysis of the consequences of forced labor

The results were not only communicated to the scientific community but also to the company. At this, especially the biographical interviews were an important asset.

Dr. Michaela Schober, who established the documentation center for sources during the project, was taken on by voestalpine; she unfortunately deceased in 2016, unexpectedly and too early.

The company opened a permanent exhibition on forced labor in 2014, which is designed according to modern standards and which was already awarded a prize. The exhibition is incorporated directly within the company, and tours as well as learning materials are offered for school. Next to the two volumes regarding the project results, a book on the exhibition was published, directed at a broad audience.

In this context it became apparent how long a process can take in order to create sustainable results – the volumes on the project results were published in 2001 and it took over ten years before the exhibition was opened. At the beginning, the topic was intensely debated in the media, and was also discussed controversially within the company. With a TV documentation on the history of voestalpine in 2013 (ORF II: “voestalpine – industry history in red-white-red”), the company finally succeeded in freeing itself from the image of a hidden Nazi company and to self-critically deal with the foundation of the company in 1938.

Karl Fallend produced a play – “To whom should I write? To god?” – from the autobiographical interviews, which premiered at the state theater in Linz.

Quality assurance/Achievement of objectives

After finalization of the project, a conference with international experts was held, in which context the results were interconnected with international research findings.

Furthermore, an additional project in cooperation with the Bank Austria and an international and independent historical commission was implemented (“Austrian banks in the Period of National Socialism”), which had a similar starting point, that is a collective law suit. This project resulted in two scientific volumes as well, one of which was also published in English (<http://www.cambridge.org/at/academic/subjects/history/twentieth-century-regional-history/austrian-banks-period-national-socialism?format=HB&isbn=9781107001657>). A project employee, Dr. Ulrike Zimmerl, is head of the Bank Austria archive by now since it was noticed during the project that the bank has large archive holdings (amongst others, the largest company archive in Austria on the second republic). This archive is accessible to the public (<http://www.bankaustria.at/en/about-us-bank-austria-the-bank-from-1855-until-today-bank-austria-historical-archive.jsp>).

Webpage/Publications

Project:

<http://www.voestalpine.com/group/en/group/history/nazi-forced-labor/>

Historical Exhibit 1938-1945 – voestalpine:

<http://www.voestalpine.com/zeitgeschichte/en>