

MARTIN DEAN

## GENERALKOMMISSARIAT WEISSRUTHENIEN AND THE MILITARY OCCUPIED TERRITORIES OF EASTERN BELORUSSIA AND RUSSIA

### GHETTO LABOR POLICIES BETWEEN GENOCIDAL AIMS AND MILITARY-ECONOMIC NEEDS, 1941–1943\*

In analyzing the issue of ghetto labor in these three large and diverse regions of the occupied Soviet Union, it is important to stress that the source basis for the history of the ghettos established by the German civil administration in *Generalkommissariat (Gk) Weissruthenien* is considerably more substantial than for the mostly short-lived ghettos in the military-occupied zones further to the east. In particular, for *Gk Weissruthenien* the thin trail of German documentation is supplemented and largely corroborated by numerous survivor testimonies, yizkor books, and war crimes trials. Nonetheless, with regard to the specific issue of ghetto labor, very little of the key contemporary German documentation has survived. The testimonies and postwar investigations provide a good overview of the types of labor performed and to some extent also the conditions, but reliable statistical information on the scale of ghetto labor and the precise material conditions remains largely lacking, even for *Gk Weissruthenien*.

In comparison, however, the available documentation is very sparse for almost all of the more than 150 ghettos in Eastern Belorussia and Russia.

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For this reason, ghetto labor in *Gk Weissruthenien* will be examined first, before reviewing what is documented for those few ghettos further east, which have left some kind of documentary trail on these issues.

### *Generalkommissariat Weissruthenien*

*Gk Weissruthenien* was comprised of western Belorussia, most of which was Polish territory in August 1939, apart from its eastern fringe that was in the pre-1939 Belorussian SSR. The German authorities established more than 90 ghettos in *Gk Weissruthenien*, generally concentrating the Jews into the Rayon centers, although some Rayons contained 2 or more ghettos, including a few in small towns and villages. The period of ghettoization extended from July 1941 until the summer of 1942.

Following the German invasion on June 22, 1941, Jews in western Belorussia were subjected to a wave of looting and sporadic killings during the first weeks of occupation. In the first two months, the rapidly moving Einsatzgruppen, supported by SS, Order Police, and *Wehrmacht* units, conducted a number of killing “Aktions” directed against suspected communists and the Jewish leadership or “intellectuals”.

### The process of ghettoization

The military administration (*Rückwärtiges Heeresgebiet Mitte*) prepared the first orders for ghettoization in July and August 1941, but only where this was necessary to prevent Jews leaving town illegally. The German Field Commandant ordered the establishment of the Minsk ghetto on July 19, 1941. In the area that soon became *Gebiet Minsk-Land*, the military administration charged the local authorities with the establishment of ghettos in August 1941, although actual implementation took several more weeks.<sup>1</sup>

On August 31, 1941, the German military administration was officially replaced by the civil administration with the creation of *Gk Weissruthenien*, headed by *Generalkommissar* Wilhelm Kube in Minsk. The region was divided into 11 districts (*Gebiete*) each headed by a *Gebietskommissar*. Each *Gebiet* in turn consisted of several Rayons, with the exception of the capital city, *Gebiet Minsk-Stadt*.

In practice it still took several months for the civil administration to become properly established throughout the region and in the meantime the

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<sup>1</sup> CHRISTIAN GERLACH, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weissrussland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: HIS, 1999), pp. 524 f. and 530. See also, e. g., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), RG-18.002M, reel 5, R70-5-47, p. 21.

*Wehrmacht* continued to exert considerable authority through the local commandants (*Ortskommandanturen*). In the fall of 1941, a wave of mass murders directed against the Jewish population by the German police and military forces was accompanied by the ghetto-ization of most remaining Jews, in some places after a selection of those able to work. For example, on October 30, units of the 707th Infantry Division assisted by Lithuanian auxiliaries under Order Police command conducted massacres of Jews in Nieśwież and Kleck. Around 5,900 Jews were reportedly shot dead in the Slutsk-Kletsk area at this time.<sup>2</sup> In Nieśwież, after the Aktion the skilled workers and their families, about 500 people, were given only a short time to move into a remnant ghetto.

Large-scale killing Aktions in some towns, notably in Słonim in November 1941, and in Nowogródek in December, were accompanied also by the ghettoization of those selected for labor. *Gebietskommissar* Gerhard Erren in Słonim boasted of having rid his Gebiet of 8,000 “unnecessary mouths” and callously concluded that

“the approximately 7,000 Jews in the town of Słonim are now all employed in the work process; they work willingly owing to their constant fear of death and in the spring they will be most carefully vetted and selected for a further reduction.”<sup>3</sup>

### The development of ghetto labor

In May 1941, *Reichsminister für die besetzten Ostgebiete* Alfred Rosenberg had issued provisional guidelines for the Occupied Eastern Territories that proposed that Jews should be removed from public life, concentrated in ghettos, and forced to work on construction and in agriculture. Once the war started, additional decrees stipulated the deployment of Jewish men and women, aged between 14 and 60, for forced labor.<sup>4</sup> Even before the establishment of ghettos, Jews were soon being seized arbitrarily off the streets in many towns to perform forced labor.

For example, in Byeń, about a month into the occupation, the Germans ordered 350 Jews to report at 6:00 A.M. for work repairing the roads. This

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<sup>2</sup> Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (BAMA), Freiburg, RH 26-707/2, Report of November 10, 1941.

<sup>3</sup> Centre de documentation juive contemporaine, CXLVa-8, Report of Gerhard Erren, January 25, 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, (Nuremberg, 1947), vol. 25, pp. 302f.

demand was repeated four days in succession.<sup>5</sup> Such initial labor assignments were often of a clearly humiliating or degrading nature. Among the tasks performed were the clearing of rubble from the fighting, cleaning the streets and houses, and the repair of bridges and roads.

### Organization of ghetto labor

The organization of ghetto labor was directed by the German labor offices (Arbeitsämter). These existed in the larger towns of Weissruthenien such as Baranowicze and Minsk and had the task of matching requests for labor with the available labor force. In practice the Jewish Councils were made personally responsible for meeting daily requests for a specific number of laborers. This had the advantage for the Germans of deflecting some of the criticism onto the councils and limiting their own administrative burden. The German authorities made dire threats against the Jewish Council members and sometimes entire Jewish communities, should they fail to meet the required quotas.

In Głębokie, for example, the *Judenrat* soon assumed responsibility for assigning people to compulsory forced labor, in order to prevent the arbitrary seizure of Jews from the streets by German officials. The Jewish Police rounded up the assigned Jews for work. At the work sites, German supervisors and local guards often beat and humiliated the Jews. An inspection visit to Głębokie by officials of the civil administration from Minsk in November 1941, commented that: “since Jews provide the craftsmen and other workers that are absolutely necessary, a liquidation [*Aktion*] cannot be conducted”.<sup>6</sup>

Inside the Wiszniew ghetto, the *Judenrat* had a number of responsibilities, as recalled by one of its members, Bar-Mikhel Rubin, who survived. These included organizing the lists of workers for forced labor at 28 separate locations and ensuring that those sent were in reasonable physical condition and had adequate clothing. The *Judenrat* tried to rotate workers in order to share the burden equitably.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> PINKES BITEN, *Der Oyfkm un Untergang fun a Yidisher Kehile*, ed. by DODL ABRAMOVITSH / MORDEKHAY V. BERNSTAYN (Buenos Aires: Bitener Landslayt in Argentine, 1954), pp. 324-326.

<sup>6</sup> USHMM, RG-53.002M, reel 11 (NARB), 370-1-55, Inspection report on visit to Głębokie on November 14, 1941.

<sup>7</sup> Vishneva, *ke-fi she-hayetah ve-enenah od; sefer zikaron*, ed. by HAYYIM ABRAMSON (Tel Aviv: Wiszniew Society in Israel, 1971), p. 116.

## Conditions of ghetto labor

Unfortunately it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the few documented examples available regarding payment of ghetto labor in *Gk Weissruthenien*. In the summer of 1942, the official wage rate for Jews was set at 0.4 to 0.8 Rubel per hour. As in Latvia, this was 80 percent of the wage for non-Jews, but the difference was to be paid by the employer to the *Generalkommissariat*.<sup>8</sup> In practice, however, Jewish workers generally were fortunate if they received some meagre rations in return for their work. This increased ration was usually administered via the *Judenrat* as part of the food distribution system. According to Michael Breslin, a Jewish survivor from Mir:

“The Judenrat sent us to work and knew how many days we had worked and therefore we, the workers, were entitled to 125 grams of bread per day. This we collected from a shop on a weekly or monthly basis.”<sup>9</sup>

Evidence from the ghettos in Lida and Baranowicze indicates that it was forbidden to pay the Jews in cash. The historian of German wartime economic policy in Belorussia, Christian Gerlach, concludes that in most cases in *Gk Weissruthenien* payment was made to Jewish workers in the form of food.<sup>10</sup> For example, in the Sluzk ghetto, the Jews who were working received 250 grams of bread per person per day, while the remaining inmates of the ghetto were left to fend for themselves. The fact that those working generally shared their rations with non-working family members may have led the Germans to establish separate working and non-working sections in several of the larger ghettos, including Sluzk, to prevent the redistribution of rations among the Jews prior to the murder of those incapable of work. This internal division of some ghettos also facilitated the implementation of the killing Aktions. In several large ghettos, including that in Słonim, special work cards were distributed to the working Jews, which were seen by the Jews as a form of protection. During selections,

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<sup>8</sup> RAUL HILBERG, *Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1982), vol. 2, p. 377. The official rate of exchange was 10 Rubel to 1 Reichsmark; the Wehrmacht was paying Jews 80 percent of the wages for non-Jews in Latvia in January 1942, see United States National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, T-459, reel 3, frames 273-274, Wehrmachtsbefehlshaber Ostland, January 27, 1942. See also GERLACH, *Kalkulierte Morde*, p. 661.

<sup>9</sup> Metropolitan Police War Crimes Unit (London), statement of Michael Breslin taken in the case against Semion Serafinowitsch, April 11, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> DR. SHLOMO KLESS, “The Judenrat of the Baranovich Ghetto, 1942-1943”, extract from the Baranowicze yizkor book, available on jewishgen.org; GERLACH, *Kalkulierte Morde*, p. 661.

however, these work cards were not always respected by the responsible German officials.

Evidence from various ghettos confirms that working Jews generally received a set ration, although the exact amounts varied from place to place, and generally declined over time. Many Jews believed that their lives would be spared, if they could make themselves useful to the Germans. In Braşlaw, Mojżesz Bielak recalled that initially working Jews received 330 grams of bread per day; this was reduced to 250 grams in November 1941. Later the distribution of daily rations was stopped altogether.<sup>11</sup> In Nowogródek, the daily ration in the ghetto was 200 grams of brown bread in the spring of 1942 (later reduced to 120 grams in the summer), a plate of soup, and an extra portion of soup for those who worked in the military barracks. Generally, more skilled workers were given better rations and might also have the opportunity to supplement their sparse resources. There were, however, a few exceptional cases where monetary payment apparently was received. For example, a survivor from Lida reported that a “respectable” German was sent to run the local brewery, which employed 42 Jewish workers brewing beer for the German army: “he paid the Jewish workers and craftsmen. Under his supervision, life in the brewery was normal”.<sup>12</sup>

Many Jewish survivors report that they received no pay for their work. For example, in the *Lenin yizkor* book, it is noted that:

“Every morning hundreds of men and women equipped with hoes and rakes would depart to work under the supervision of the Nazis – it was hard labor without any pay. If a day passed without our being beaten, we considered that our reward.”<sup>13</sup>

Arbitrary punishments, ranging from beatings to the death penalty, even for minor infractions were commonplace for those performing ghetto labor. For example, the tailor Moisei Kaplan in Baranowicze was shot for being just five minutes late for work. As elsewhere in the Nazi camp system, the employers of Jewish labor were not intended to retain all the excess

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<sup>11</sup> Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, 301/3140, testimony of Mojżesz Bielak, January 23-27, 1948.

<sup>12</sup> *Sefer Lida*, ed. by ALEXANDER MANOR (Tel Aviv: Irgun yotse Lida be-Yi’sra’el u-Va’ad ha-‘ezrah li-Yehude Lida ba-Artsot ha-Berit, 1970), p. 311. Translation available on jewishgen.org.

<sup>13</sup> *Kehilat Lenin: Sefer Zikaron*. ed. by MOSHE TAMARI (Tel Aviv: Former residents of Lenin in Israel and USA, 1957).

profit<sup>14</sup>; a daily rate was to be paid to the civil administration for the use of Jewish labor. For 1943, expected income from Jewish labour estimated at RM 150,000 was included in the planned budget of the *Generalkommissar*.<sup>15</sup>

### How many Jews performed ghetto labor

Precise numbers of Jewish laborers are not available and the calculations are necessarily made more difficult by the periodic massacres of Jews, which by the summer of 1942 had claimed almost the entire non-working population. Of the roughly 250,000 Jews in *Gk Weissruthenien* in the summer of 1941, at least 100,000 (most of those aged between 14 and 60) were at some time involved in ghetto labor. By the summer of 1942, however, the total number of Jews had been reduced by more than half, although the percentage of working Jews among those that remained was by then probably well over 75 percent. For example, one German report, probably from the second half of 1942, mentions 20,000 Jews (11,000 men and 9,000 women) were capable of work in the largest ghetto in Minsk, which initially had held some 60,000 Jews or more.<sup>16</sup>

### Types of labor performed

The types of work performed by Jews varied from skilled labor in workshops, sawmills, and factories, to hard labor digging peat, extracting gravel, or building roads. Some Jews also worked in offices or as personal servants and cleaners and a few were employed in forestry or agriculture. Unfortunately little information is available regarding the degree to which Jews could influence their own labor assignment. Some craftsmen and

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the “Judenleihgebühr” (rental fee for Jews) imposed on employers operating the forced labor camps for Jews in the Warthegau, who had to pay RM 0.70 per day for each Jew to the Litzmannstadt Ghetto Administration (*Gettoverwaltung*), ISAIAH TRUNK, *Lódź Ghetto: A History*, trans. and ed. by ROBERT MOSES SHAPIRO (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press in cooperation with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2006), p. 176. Similar payments were made to the SS-WVHA by firms employing concentration camp labor.

<sup>15</sup> HILBERG, *Die Vernichtung*, vol. 2, p. 377 f.; Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, R 2301/7219, Rechnungshof des Reiches: Haushaltsplan Generalkommissar Weissruthenien 1943, pp. 226 f. This source predicts an income of RM 180,000 from wages for Jewish laborers, less RM 30,000 for the associated expenses. This sum was probably not received in full, due to the murder or deportation of almost all remaining Jewish ghetto laborers in *Gk Weissruthenien* during the course of 1943.

<sup>16</sup> Yad Vashem Archives, M-41/315 (NARB, 370-1-245, pp. 26 f.), undated report on labor deployment.

others working directly for individual employers may have exercised some choice. For those performing manual labor in larger groups, however, the German labor office or the Jewish Council assigned them to work – usually with severe consequences for non-compliance. Some Jews even bribed their way into arduous labor for little or no pay, if it might mean a better chance of survival.

In Baranowicze, ghetto inmates worked at a large number of military bases, construction sites, factories, workshops, public utilities, and offices. Among the offices employing significant numbers of Jews were: the military vehicle depot (*Heereskraftpark*) (610 people); the *Luftwaffe* base (120); Organisation Todt (OT) (100); the railway (160); the military airfield (300); the carpentry factory (55); the rope-making factory (40); the construction site for the Koldyczewo concentration camp (30); the office of the *Gebietskommissar* (25); while between 40 and 260 Jews worked for the Security Police and SD, mostly in various workshops for tailors, carpenters, shoe and glove-makers, and watch-repairers. Smaller groups of Jews also worked in the bakery, the sewage department, and the medical warehouse.

#### Who benefited from ghetto labor

The main beneficiary of ghetto labor was the German civil administration, which received payments from other offices for the use of Jewish labor. In the summer of 1942, acting *Gebietskommissar* Petersen in Głębokie reported that income from Jewish labor farmed out on a contract basis, mainly to the Wehrmacht, was among the sources of income for his office.<sup>17</sup>

In Postawy, and other places, non-Jewish inhabitants could obtain a document signed by the Security Police or other German authorities, giving them permission to rent out Jewish labor, in return for a fee paid to the German authorities. If the Jews were lucky, they might also receive some food in payment for such work. In Wasiliszk, for half a *Reichsmark*, any Christian could buy a Jew for a day's work. The town administration made a business out of Jewish labor.

When some Christians were dissatisfied with the Jewish workers, they cursed and beat them. Other Christians were more humane, however; they gave the Jews food and even allowed them to take food home for their

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<sup>17</sup> “Nazi Gold” from Belarus: Documents and Materials, ed. by VLADIMIR ADAMUSHKO et al. (Minsk: National Archive of the Republic of Belarus, 1998), p. 107, *Gebietskommissar* Głębokie to *Generalkommissar* Weissruthenien, September 4, 1942, and pp. 66–67, *Gebietskommissar* to *Generalkommissar* Weissruthenien, June 22, 1942.



families.<sup>18</sup> As noted above, the *Wehrmacht*, Security Police, Organisation Todt, and other German offices, alongside the civil administration, directly exploited Jewish labor. To the extent that this labor was difficult to replace, some of these offices may have sought to retain Jewish workers. In Głębokie, for example, members of the civil administration sent large quantities of goods produced by Jewish craft workshops back to Germany to line their own pockets. Ultimately, however, such corrupt officials provided no protection against the orders of the Security Police for the remaining Jews to be murdered. By the summer of 1943, Himmler became concerned about the escape of some Jews to join the partisans and ordered the few remaining ghettos to be liquidated by the fall of 1943.

### Eastern Belorussia and Russia

The German military authorities and the *Einsatzgruppen* established about 100 ghettos for Jews scattered throughout Eastern Belorussia, and another 50 ghettos on occupied Russian territory, most being located on the eastern fringe of the former Pale of Settlement, which during Tsarist Russia marked the region where Jews were allowed to live. The commander of *Rückwärtiges Heeresgebiet Mitte*, General Max von Schenckendorff, issued an order for the creation of separate Jewish quarters on July 13, 1941. It stated that Jews were to be concentrated in a closed community in houses only occupied by Jews.<sup>19</sup> Among the first ghettos established in Eastern Belorussia were those in Slavnoe (according to survivors, on July 9), Zembin (mid-July 1941), Ostrovno (on July 19), and Krupki (also in July). Ghettoization, however, was not a high priority.

Subsequent guidelines issued by the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (OKH) in August, and circulated by the *Bereichskommando des rückwärtigen Heeresgebiets (Berück) Mitte* on September 12, advised that fenced ghettos were only to be established when the location of the Jewish quarter in relation to the non-Jewish residential area made it necessary for the effective guarding of the Jewish quarter. Such ghettos were only to be established in towns with larger Jewish populations and only if other more urgent tasks would not thereby be neglected. Jews could leave the Jewish

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<sup>18</sup> Sefer Zikaron li-Kehilot Shits'uts'in, Vasililishki, Ostrin, Novidvor, Roz'anke, ed. by C. E. VOLOCHINSKY et al. (Tel Aviv: Irgun Yots'e Ostrin be-Yisrael, 1966), pp. 232-235. Use has been made here of the translation by Miriam Dashkin Beckerman, see jewishgen.org.

<sup>19</sup> National Archives of the Republic of Belarus (NARB), 409-1-1, p. 71, Berück Mitte, Abt. VII/Mil. Verw., Verwaltungsanordnung Nr. 2, July 13, 1941, as cited by GERLACH, *Kalkulierte Morde*, p. 524.

quarters only for work assignments or with special permission from the *Ortskommandant*.<sup>20</sup> These orders, which left much initiative to commanders at the local level, explain how the patchwork of open ghettos, enclosed ghettos, and also other places with no resettlement of the Jews, came about.

In most cases the ghettos were established and overseen by the local Germany military administration (*Ortskommandanturen*), but in some cases, especially in larger cities, the *Einsatzgruppen* (Security Police) also played a leading role. In Orsha, the ghetto was established following a decision taken in the office of the *Ortskommandantur*. It consisted of between 25 and 40 houses, where about 2,000 people were concentrated. The Jews were given three days to move in. On one side, the ghetto was bordered by the Orshitsa River, and on the other sides it was surrounded with barbed wire and guarded. The Jewish cemetery was included in the ghetto area.<sup>21</sup>

Ghettoization was often accompanied by anti-Jewish violence and the confiscation or looting of property. In Mogilev, the Jews allegedly tried to sabotage resettlement into the ghetto, which resulted in the Security Police shooting 113 Jews.<sup>22</sup> In Ostrovno, on the day of the resettlement, a young Jew who refused to move into the ghetto was shot and killed. During the resettlement of the Jews into the Polotsk ghetto, the Nazis confiscated Jewish property, beating many Jews in the process.

Many of the ghettos established in these regions existed only for a few weeks and were liquidated in the fall of 1941. A number of ghettos, however, existed into the spring or summer of 1942. In particular, the large ghetto in Smolensk, where about 1,500 Jews were exploited systematically for forced labor, was not liquidated until mid-July 1942.

### The development of ghetto labor

Most historians argue that the exploitation of the Jews for labor was only of marginal importance in the ghettos of Eastern Belorussia and Russia, since much of the heavy industry had been evacuated or destroyed by the Soviets, and sufficient non-Jewish manpower remained. Nonetheless, Jews were

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<sup>20</sup> Berück Mitte, Abt. VII/Kr.-Verw., Verwaltungsanordnungen Nr. 6, September 12, 1941, as cited in *ibid.*, p. 525.

<sup>21</sup> GENNADII VINNITSA, *Gorech' i bol' (Orsha)*, (1998), pp. 66–69; see also USHMM, RG-06.025\*03, “War Crimes Investigation and Prosecution”, microfiche 13, files 514–517, interrogations of Paul Eick, December 1945.

<sup>22</sup> Tätigkeits- und Lagebericht, no. 6 (October 1–31, 1941) in: *Die Einsatzgruppen in der besetzten Sowjetunion 1941/42*, ed. by PETER KLEIN (Berlin: Hentrich, 1997), p. 230.

used for forced labor in almost all Eastern Belorussian ghettos and it has been documented also for some Russian ghettos. Forced labor tasks included cleaning the streets, repairing roads, digging military defenses, and cleaning or craft work for the German occupying forces. Sometimes, however, forced labor was intended merely to humiliate the Jews. In Parichi, Jews were taken out each day for forced labor, and when there was no work for them, the authorities still made them move sand from one place to another.

In September 1941, the *Wehrmacht* forbade the use of Jewish workers other than in closed columns.<sup>23</sup> According to Christian Gerlach, this order effectively excluded Jewish craftsmen from the economy and accelerated the process of destruction. From a few ghettos, selected skilled workers were spared initially from the killing “Aktions”, but this was usually only for a few weeks. The short duration of labor exploitation in many of these ghettos makes it very difficult to analyze, in the absence of more than anecdotal evidence, that some form of labor took place.

### Organization of ghetto labor

As in other regions, the tasks of the Jewish Councils, or in some cases a single Jewish Elder, included registering the Jews and meeting German demands for forced labor and “contributions”. The Smolensk Jewish Elder, Dr. Painson, a well-known dentist, organized the Jews for forced labor in accordance with the German commandant’s orders. During the first months after the Smolensk ghetto was established, Jewish craftsmen received their work instructions from the labor office (*Arbeitsamt*). The commandant’s office issued a few work permits for tailors and shoemakers to continue their trades. In October 1941, the mayor of Smolensk Boris Men’sagin received a directive (“Regarding the Jews”) from the *Feldkommandantur*. It included the following instructions:

“Based on order no. 50023/41 issued by the Economic Inspectorate on October 22, 1941, it is determined that Jews shall be excluded from the list of unemployed workers [...]. Jews must be dismissed immediately by the *Wehrmacht*. After the exclusion of the Jews from the list, their equipment must be confiscated and handed into protective custody at the mayor’s administrative headquarters. The mayor is obliged to consult with the labor registration office and distribute the confiscated equipment to Aryan craftsmen [...]. Any usable items found in the possession of Jews should be confiscated and stored. All Jews shall be confined in a ghetto.”

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<sup>23</sup> OKW/W.F.St./Abt. L (IV/Qu), Betr.: Juden in den neu besetzten Ostgebieten, September 12, 1941 (BAMA), as cited by GERLACH, *Kalkulierte Morde*, p. 578.

The directive further emphasized that Jews should be gathered in closed columns for forced labor, and assigned to the most demanding physical work.<sup>24</sup>

All able-bodied Jews were sent out on a daily basis to perform forced labor. Initially Jews were responsible for cleaning the city of Smolensk. They cleared debris from the streets and repaired damaged buildings. Then on the order of the *Feldkommandantur*, the inhabitants of the ghetto began to work on the railway. They were escorted to work in columns of 50, 100, or more people, guarded by the Russian *Ordnungsdienst* and Germans with dogs. At the railway station Jews washed and cleaned railway wagons, and also loaded and unloaded them. They hauled railway ties and cleaned toilets even though they never received adequate tools for these tasks. In the winter they cleared snow from the tracks, the roads, and the airbase. Weak and infirm Jewish workers were shot, and their co-workers were compelled to bury them on the spot.<sup>25</sup> Working Jews received a ration of 200 grams (7 ounces) of bread that consisted of bran dust mixed with turnips and beet-roots.

### Conditions of ghetto labor

For the small ghetto in Kaluga, detailed information has survived about the performance of forced labor. The Germans issued orders for all Jews between the ages of 14 and 60 to perform hard physical labor, often accompanied by beatings. Forced labor began at the start of the German occupation, but once the ghetto was established in mid-November, the main task for the next two weeks was constructing a fence around the ghetto. There were no construction materials, so the fence from around another building had to be dismantled and reused. Three German *Feldgendarmes* and local Russian policemen oversaw the work.

On November 27, 1941, the German commandant threatened that if on the following day one hundred Jewish laborers did not appear for work, then every tenth person would be shot. At that time the occupiers in Kaluga had registered 154 Jews, of which only 17 were able-bodied men, 43 were men aged over 60 or disabled, eight were mothers with babies or young children, 21 were women over 60 or disabled, and 47 were children aged under 14, the remaining 18 being women aged 14-60. Therefore, only 35-

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<sup>24</sup> See L. KOTOV, "Kak bylo unichtozheno Smolenskoe ghetto", in: *Krai Smolenskii*, no. 2 (1990): 40-48.

<sup>25</sup> I. TSYNMAN, *Bab'i Iary Smolenshchiny* (Smolensk, 2001): testimony of Professor Boris Bazilevskii, September 28, 1943, p. 29; testimony of Tat'iana Tret'iakova, pp. 43-44; and testimony of Vladimir Khizver, p. 228.

40 ghetto inmates were fit to work, but all the children and elderly also reported to avoid the collective punishment. Although a number of local craftsmen (tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, and others) were represented within the ghetto, they were no longer permitted to perform these trades. The assigned work included cleaning the streets, and burying the corpses of German soldiers. The overseers often beat Jews as they performed forced labor. Even the children in the ghetto were forced to work, some being made to move bodies in the streets outside the ghetto. Although ration cards were issued for pickled cucumbers, pickled tomatoes, and salt, very little food was actually distributed to the Jews.<sup>26</sup>

In Schedrin, Eastern Belorussia, Jews received a ration only of 100 grams (3.5 ounces) of bread, in contrast to 1 kilogram of bread issued to a non-Jew, even though the output quota for Jews was three times greater. Some Jews assigned to work outside the ghettos in Eastern Belorussia used this opportunity to barter remaining possessions with local inhabitants for food. In Tolochin, 3 or 4 Jewish men were hanged in the main square in October 1941 for refusing to work.<sup>27</sup> Reports of beatings and the imposition of humiliating work tasks, including the cleaning of toilets without any tools, or the imposition of futile labor tasks, have been received for several ghettos in Eastern Belorussia.

### How many Jews performed ghetto labor

Even rough figures for the number of Jewish laborers are not available for most ghettos in these regions. Of the more than 250,000 Jews living in Eastern Belorussia in 1939, probably only around 50 percent remained in the region and came under German occupation, as large numbers evacuated or managed to flee. Most sources indicate that almost all able-bodied Jews aged between 14 and 60 were required to perform some kind of forced labor from early in the occupation. However, as many ghetto inmates were comprised of the sick, elderly or children, and since the *Einsatzgruppen* killed some male Jews in the first days of the occupation, it is likely that only some 75,000 or so Jews in Eastern Belorussia were subjected to forced labor and less than this to labor in ghettos.

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<sup>26</sup> On the Kaluga ghetto, see VADIM DOUBSON, "Ghetto na okkupirovannoy territorii rossiiskoy federatsii", in: Vestnik. Evreyskogo Universiteta. Istoriya. Kultura. Tsivilizatsiya, no. 3, 21 (2000): 157-184; Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv rossiiskoi federatsii (State Archives of the Russian Federation), Moscow, 7021-47-1 and 4 (USHMM, RG-22.002M, reel 11); and USHMM, RG-50.378 0016, Oral history interview with Yuri Izrailovich German, August 5, 1995.

<sup>27</sup> VINNITSA, Gorech' i bol', pp. 124-143.

The 50 ghettos on occupied Russian territory held only just over 20,000 Jews.<sup>28</sup> In Kaluga, as noted, only about one quarter of the Jews were fit to work, although a number of children also helped out. In Smolensk the proportion of working Jews appears to have been higher. As a number of Jews were murdered during the process of ghettoization, the total number of Jewish ghetto laborers on occupied Russian territory likely did not exceed 10,000, and probably was somewhat less.

### Types of labor performed

For the open ghetto in Chashniki, it is recorded that from the very beginning the Germans imposed compulsory labor on the Jews. Young people were sent to work at the railway station (quite far from the town center), at the fuel depot nearby, and in the officers' mess. The Germans and their collaborators also imposed some short-term work tasks on the Jews.

At the end of September 1941, a group of Jewish young people (according to various estimates, about 50 to 100 people, mainly boys, but also some girls) were sent to a nearby peat farm to cut peat and load it onto carts. The work lasted until November. The draftees did not receive any food, but they were allowed to return home on Sundays in order "to collect some food for the next week". In fact, the young workers had to leave the labor camp at night and go to the villages to exchange clothes, utensils, and other items for food.<sup>29</sup>

### Who benefited from ghetto labor

Little information is available regarding the beneficiaries of Jewish labor in these two eastern regions. Much of the work, however, was organized by the Wehrmacht to remove rubble, clear roads of snow, repair bridges, or load trains, mainly to assist with communications and supplies. Some tasks also went to the benefit of the local administrations, but the renting of Jews to private farmers or other employers seems to have been rare, likely due to the Soviet structure of the economy with almost no private enterprise.

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<sup>28</sup> IL'JA AL'TMANN, *Opfer des Hasses: Der Holocaust in der UdSSR 1941–1945* (Zürich: Gleichen, 2008), p. 128, gives higher figures for the number of Jews in the ghettos on occupied Russian territory, but he includes four sites in the Crimea, at that time considered part of Russia.

<sup>29</sup> For additional sources on Chashniki, see the article by DANIEL ROMANOVSKY in the USHMM's *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos 1933–1945*, vol. 2 *Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe*, pp. 1657–1659.

Some Jews were retained to work on kolkhozes, but again this mainly benefitted the requisitions imposed by the *Wehrmacht*.

### Summary

Ghettoization in the occupied Soviet territories was an ad hoc policy, in which central guidelines left much room for local discretion and initiative in terms of implementation. In Generalkommissariat Weissruthenien, labor exploitation was among the reasons for the establishment of ghettos and it certainly played a key role in the decision to retain a few remnant ghettos after the main liquidation Aktions in the summer of 1942. In the military-controlled areas, ghetto establishment was also put in the hands of local commandants, but here issues of labor exploitation were of less significance.

There were several key differences between the implementation of ghetto labor under the German civil administration in *Gk Weissruthenien*, as compared to the military-occupied regions of Eastern Belorussia and Russia. The greater number of Jews and the key role of some Jewish craftsmen in the local economy caused the German administration to employ some 100,000 Jews as ghetto laborers in *Gk Weissruthenien*. These numbers were reduced considerably in the summer and fall of 1942, but the last ghettos were not liquidated until the fall of 1943.

In Eastern Belorussia and Russia, the greater integration of Jews within the Sovietized economy and the rapid evacuation of much of the industrial base, meant that the Germans had much less need for Jewish workers in these regions. The *Einsatzgruppen*, assisted by forces of the *Waffen SS*, the Order Police, the *Wehrmacht*, and local collaborators, liquidated many of the ghettos established in these areas that remained under military occupation within only a few weeks or months. Nonetheless, forced labor was a defining aspect of almost all of these ghettos, as reflected in both German orders and the recollections of survivors. Just as the establishment of ghettos has been shown to have been more widespread than documented in the *Einsatzgruppen* or military reports alone, similarly, the whole range of discriminatory measures, including compulsory labor, was applied to Jews in these regions, alongside the rapid progression to the extermination of entire communities.

Unfortunately the short life-span of these eastern ghettos makes it very hard to document the organization and conditions of labor there. A major difference was the banning of Jews from craft occupations in the eastern regions, if this was not always fully implemented on the ground. The distribution of small food rations is documented for several eastern ghettos,

which was probably linked to the performance of labor, as was the case generally in *Gk Weissruthenien*. However, starvation and disease appears to have been worst in the few larger ghettos of Eastern Belorussia, due to German plans to starve out the cities, which affected those confined to ghettos most severely.

In *Gk Weissruthenien*, Jewish Councils pursued a strategy of survival through labor, even though this offered at best only a few more months of reprieve. Jewish Councils were charged with organizing the labor columns and fulfilling these German demands was a question of life and death for *Judenrat* members.

In *Gk Weissruthenien*, conditions were somewhat better for working Jews, especially those permitted to exercise their craft skills. However, only in a few places could they still work for local peasants and thereby barter for extra food, although such transactions continued of course illegally. After the ghetto liquidations in the summer of 1942, the last remnant ghettos more closely resembled forced labor camps, with Jews working under harsh conditions and under close guard, such that illegal trade also became more difficult. The last ghettos to be liquidated were Lida in September 1943 and Minsk in October 1943, with some of these Jews being sent to Majdanek and Sobibór, where almost all perished.

Ultimately, making themselves useful to the Germans through work offered at best only temporary protection to the Jews against the genocidal plans of the German authorities. But the extra time bought in a few places, such as Nowogródek and Minsk, did allow several thousand Jews to escape to the partisans in the forests. Ironically, some of the craft skills that had been useful to the Germans were then put at the disposal of the Soviet partisans, as the escaped Jews also had to persuade the Soviet partisan leaders of their utility in order to survive.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, NECHAMA TEC, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).