

Being a Civilian Forced Laborer and Displaced Person (DP) in an Impoverished Society: The Nutritional Supply of Forced Laborers and DPs in Lower Austria under National Socialism and the Soviet Occupation (1939–1955)

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Aside from the autochthonous population, the nutritional shortages during and after World War II especially affected those people who had arrived in the territory of present-day Lower Austria during this period of time. Civilian forced laborers from just about every part of Europe formed a special group in this context. Of around 580,000 people forced to work in the “Ostmark”, around 290,000 were stationed in the Gau of Lower Austria.

The priority of supplying food to civilian forced laborers under Nazi rule followed the logic of a political economy oriented towards “total war” which was simultaneously subject to Nazi racial ideology. Along with ethnic belonging, the workplace also conditioned a nutritional disparity between the rural and urban spheres. Those forced laborers employed in the periphery in agriculture were not only better fed than those in forced labor camps, who were primarily deployed in industry, they could also more easily generate strategies for procuring additional foodstuffs.

The end of the war did not constitute a caesura in this nutritional situation, as a large part of the now former forced laborers had to while away the time until their repatriation as Displaced Persons in camps. Despite international aid and the measures taken by the (Soviet) occupation powers, lack of nourishment continued into the 1950s. The Austrian civil administration could only noticeably improve the fate of the former forced laborers following the general consolidation of the nutritional situation.

If Lower Austria is on the one hand predestined for an extensive study of civilian forced labor, then the aspect of nutrition on the other hand offers great potential, allowing conclusions to be drawn on the functionality and solidarity of societies in emergency situations as well as under the influence of various regimes.

This project examines questions relating to the organization and structure of the nutrition of forced laborers during the various phases from 1939 to 1955, contrasting their nourishment with that of the local population, and investigates factors such as origin, sex, workplace, and accommodation and how these could influence nutrition.