

RESEARCH ON NAZI FORCED LABOUR



in Archives and
Online Databases

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended for anyone who wants to conduct research on the subject of Nazi forced labour – for school, projects, civic engagement, or university. It primarily focuses on research methods using historical sources found in archives and online. The first section of the guide is designed to assist in developing research questions that align with your interest. The second sections provides an overview of historical sources and identifies those that are important for research on Nazi forced labour. In the third section, you will find information on archives, including their structure and the relevant archives in German-speaking countries that may be useful for research on Nazi forced labour.

1. WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR?

When conducting research, it is always important to identify the specific questions you want to answer. There are countless stories about forced labour to be told, for no other reason than the sheer number of people who were forced labourers and the many thousands of places where they were forced to work and live. Therefore, it is vital to define the boundaries of your research and narrow down your focus as much as possible. The more precise your research question is, the higher the likelihood of finding relevant historical sources and being able to answer your question.

Some areas of research are:

- Reconstructing the biography of a former forced labourer whose name you know
- What camps were there in your immediate neighbourhood? Where did forced labourers have to work?
- The history of a company that you know of or where you work
- The role of forced labour in your family history
- The history of a person who profited from forced labour or became a perpetrator

Different kinds of sources are relevant depending on what you want to research. To begin with, let us explain what historical sources actually are.

2. WHAT ARE HISTORICAL SOURCES?

Historical sources are all things, such as texts and objects, that were created in and provide information about the past. Many sources are administrative products of their time and were created for a specific purpose. For instance, the “work books for foreigners” were given to civilian forced labourers to manage and coordinate their deployment. Today, this source gives us information about where a person was forced to work, how long they had to work at each place, and for which companies they worked.

When examining documents from the Nazi era, it is crucial to consider the perspective from which they were written. This involves identifying the author, their intended audience, and the purpose of the document. It is also essential to understand the historical context in which the document was produced, its original purpose, and the conditions under which it was created. Additionally, it is important to identify any gaps or missing information in the document.

Differentiating between various kinds of sources is also important. It is helpful to ask whether the source was created by an administrative or public institution or by an individual, such as in a diary, autobiographical narrative, or letter. This can help us understand the perspective of the source and its potential biases.

Administrative records

Many individuals and organisations were involved in organising forced labour, and they generated records concerning forced labourers. The documents of these actors are especially useful for research:

→ The police

All foreigners, including forced labourers, were required to be registered with the police. Local authorities maintained lists of registered foreigners in their respective districts, which are now archived.

→ The labour administration

The labour offices were the central actors in the administration of forced labour. They produced many documents relating to forced labourers, such as what were known as “workbook” cards. Many of these workbook cards are now in the Arolsen Archives.

→ Social and health insurance

Forced labourers had to have social and health insurance. If such documents exist, they are stored in the archives of federal, state, and local insurance institutions.

→ The employers

Employing forced labourers required a great deal of bureaucracy. Employers produced countless documents, sometimes including photos. Some of these documents may be found in the company archives but are not always accessible to the public. It is worth inquiring there regardless. At times, companies may have transferred these documents to other archives, so it is a good idea to check with state or local archives.

→ Administrations after liberation

After the liberation of forced labourers, they were classified as Displaced Persons. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) registered them and provided food and medical care. Most UNRRA documents have been digitised and are now part of the inventories of the Arolsen Archives.

→ Compensation claims

Numerous former forced labourers attempted to receive compensation for the work they were forced to do. They composed letters and applications and frequently attached documents and photographs to prove their forced labour. These letters were sent to German authorities with a request for validation of their forced labour service. These documents were also sent to the compensation offices in the respective countries of origin, where they were scanned. They were then either returned to the owners or handed over to the respective national archives. This means that the national archives in Poland and the Czech Republic have such documents. In Russia, many records and photographs have been collected by the human rights organisation Memorial. There are inventories in the National Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Ukraine.

As well as these, many other documents relating to forced labour were produced in the Nazi state. These include official instructions for everyone involved with forced labour, public decrees and laws, and propaganda material. You can find a small selection of administrative documentation on the Nazi forced labour on the Education Platform Nazi Forced Labour.

Personal testimonies

Personal testimonies are first-hand accounts created by individuals that provide information about themselves or their experiences. They can take various forms, such as diaries, drawings, autobiographies, or letters. Many institutions, including memorial sites, universities, and initiatives, have documented interviews with former forced labourers. The Free University of Berlin's interview project, "Forced Labour 1939-1945 – Memory and History," is a notable example that includes over 600 audio and video interviews with former forced labourers from 26 countries. The project also offers transcripts, photographs, short biographies, and translations. Apart from biographical sources, the project provides expert talks and teaching materials on Nazi forced labour.

→ <https://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/en/index.html>

The Nazi Forced Labour Documentation Centre also has an online collection of interviews, photographs and documents, mainly relating to forced labourers in Berlin.

→ <https://www.dz-ns-zwangsarbeit.de/zeitzeugenarchiv/quellen/>

3. WHERE DO I FIND HISTORICAL SOURCES?

Most historical documents are collected and stored in archives. These archives do not, however, use broad categories such as "Nazi forced labour" but instead organize documents according to their internal logic. As a result, documents related to a particular subject may be scattered throughout different parts of the archive. In order to locate specific documents, it is important to have a clear idea of what you are looking for and to understand the archive's organizational system. This knowledge will help ensure that your search produces the desired results.

What are archives? How are they organised?

Archival materials are organized based on their origin or "provenance". This means that documents are grouped according to the categories in which the administration filed them. Therefore, to locate the documents you need, you must first determine which authority or institution was responsible for the processes you are researching. Then, check which archive these documents were filed in, following the principle of provenance. For example, suppose you have heard about a camp for forced labourers during the Nazi period that was located near your place of residence. In that case, you should consider which government department might have been responsible for it. Many Offices for Building Regulations and Preservation of Historical Monuments (Amt für Bauordnung und Denkmalpflege) have archives where you can find old building permits and construction records. If you're lucky, you may even find the building plans for the camp.

What archives exist? What is where relating to Nazi forced labour?

Arolsen Archives

The Arolsen Archives, previously known as the International Tracing Service, are the most comprehensive collection of information about the victims and survivors of the Nazi regime. It was established by the Allies in 1949 with the aim of gathering information on victims of Nazi rule and assisting people in locating their missing family members. The archive contains a wide variety of documents, such as index cards, personnel records, camp and deportation lists, photographs, letters, and diaries of survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators. It is estimated that the collection, which is not yet entirely digitised, comprises approximately 30 million files, index cards, and lists related to Holocaust victims and survivors, concentration camp prisoners, and foreign forced labourers. The archive's many registration cards and workbooks are of particular interest in relation to civilian forced labourers. The inventory of liberated survivors (Displaced Persons) contains a vast collection of records that can be used to research what happened to former forced labourers in the (immediate) post-war period.

The search is conducted mainly by name.

The online archive is a recommended starting point for initial research:

→ <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/search/>.

Bundesarchiv (Federal Archive of Germany)

The Federal Archives in Berlin hold key documents from the Nazi era: “In addition to the state archives of central civil and military authorities of the so-called Third Reich, [these are] documents of the NSDAP, its organisations and affiliated associations. These include above all, the NSDAP’s Central Membership Index with some 12.7 million index cards, but also party correspondence (some 1.3 million files), personnel files of members of the Sturmabteilung (SA) and Schutzstaffel (SS), personal files of the Race and Settlement Main Office of the SS and personal files of the Reich Chamber of Culture.” These documents primarily contain information about the perpetrators and profiteers and the organisation of forced labour – and only indirectly about the everyday lives of the forced labourers. In addition to countless written documents, there are pictures, maps, posters, films, bequests, documents from other parties, clubs and associations, collections or official publications, and documents relating to companies. The archive also has an extensive library collection for further research. With invenio, the Federal Archives offer both a digital search engine for sources and, in some cases, their digitised versions: → [invenio.bundesarchiv.de](https://www.invenio.bundesarchiv.de)

The online platform of the Bundesarchiv and the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future (EVZ) is a valuable resource for researching Nazi forced labor. It provides an online database that lists archives and includes an interactive map of various types of archives and archive inventories. The site also offers a list of detention centers and camps similar to concentration camps with reference to institutions and companies where forced labor was used. This information is helpful for researchers looking to study the history of Nazi forced labor.

→ <https://www.bundesarchiv.de/zwangsarbeit/archiv/index.html>

There are often initiatives, history workshops, or individuals who have researched the sites of former accommodation camps for forced laborers. A list of detention centers can be a good starting point to find a campsite in your area and then conduct online research to find out if any person or initiative has worked on it.

In the Bundesarchiv Koblenz, researchers can access propaganda photographs depicting acts of war, capture of prisoners of war, and transportation of forced labourers, many of which are already available online.

→ <https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/dba/de/>

At the archive location in Ludwigsburg, there are documents that were created during investigations of Nazi perpetrators. These documents contain witness statements by former concentration camp prisoners and prisoners of war about their overseers. They also contain information about the names of victims and their living conditions.

→ <https://www.bundesarchiv.de/DE/Navigation/Meta/Ueber-uns/Dienstorte/Ludwigsburg/ludwigsburg.html>

Archives of the German states (Länder): Landesarchive and Staatsarchive

The central archives of the states in Germany are called either Staatsarchive or Landesarchive. They preserve the records of all state authorities, such as the government, courts and administrations of the state in question. They also contain a large number of documents relating to Nazi forced labour and the everyday life of former forced labourers, but again primarily from the point of view of the perpetrators and those who benefited from forced labour. For example, the files of local courts, penal institutions and prisons relating to proceedings against former forced labourers can be consulted, or the files of the public health offices, which provide an insight into the everyday life of forced labourers, which was often marked by illness, and the medical care, or rather lack of thereof. As the organisation of the archives is a matter for the federal states themselves and can therefore be structured in different ways, it may be that the files mentioned as examples are kept in the municipal archives, so that these must first be researched for the relevant question. This can be done online or by contacting the archives.

The Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office

The Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office contains documents relating to international agreements and affairs of the German Reich, East Germany and the Federal Republic of Germany, and all diplomatic correspondence. As some of these agreements were crucial to the policy and implementation of mass forced labour during the Second World War, this archive may also be relevant, depending on the issue at hand.

Municipal archives

Municipal archives are the umbrella term for all city, town and district archives. All municipal offices and institutions transfer their documents to the respective municipal archives. There are also often local and sometimes national newspaper collections. As Nazi forced labour was ubiquitous, it is worth visiting local municipal archives, especially for local history projects. These archives contain, among other things, documents from registration offices, social and health offices and civil registers. The files often contain information about people who were brought to the former German Reich as forced labourers. They provide information about the number of forced labourers, the (non-)treatment of their illnesses and their family relationships. Registration offices often kept death lists of forced labourers. Historical documents on the food situation and distribution can be found in the documents of the food and economic offices. These archives also contain company documents and photographs, files on camp locations, police documents and occasionally first-person documents from forced labourers. Labour office documents, where they have survived, are also kept in these archives.

Business archives

Some German states have regional business archives, typically managed by local chambers of commerce and industry. Companies and corporations also collect and maintain their records either in their own archives or in the regional business archives. Some companies have established their own places of remembrance or have had their history researched by independent historians.

A helpful, if not exhaustive, list of companies that employed forced laborers can be found here:

→ https://ns-in-ka.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Liste_Unternehmen.pdf

Church archives

During the period of forced labour, the churches also forced people to work. All church records are stored in the diocesan and state church archives. The central archives of the Protestant Church are managed by the Evangelisches Zentralarchiv in Berlin. Additionally, the Protestant Church in each federal state has its own state church archive. The Vatican Archive, which is the central Catholic archive in Rome, is very difficult to access, but it also contains documents related to forced labour. The equivalent of national church archives in the Catholic Church are diocesan archives. Some Catholic monasteries, convents, and orders also have their archives.

History workshops and memorials

There are now numerous memorials and places of remembrance dedicated to Nazi forced labour and other Nazi crimes. The staff members working there are experts on the subject and are happy to answer any questions you may have. Even if the local memorial doesn't specialize in Nazi forced labour, such as being a concentration camp memorial, the staff can put you in touch with people who can research the subject. Moreover, several educational centres and memorials offer databases of camps that show the numerous sites of forced labour camps. It's worth searching for one in your area. For an overview of institutions in Germany that work on the subject of Nazi forced labour, check out the Education Platform's Places page. There are also many history workshops and individuals who have researched forced labour locally and can be consulted as experts. They often have additional material about and from individuals who were forced labourers and had personal contact with them.

In addition to conducting online research on historical sources, you may find it helpful to refer to printed overviews. For instance, the book „Fremdarbeiter. Politik und Praxis des ‚Ausländereinsatzes‘ in der Kriegswirtschaft des Dritten Reiches“ (in German) by Ulrich Herbert (1999) has a collection of sources in its

appendix. Another helpful resource is „Verzeichnis der Nachweise für NS-Zwangsarbeiter(innen) bei Archiven und anderen Institutionen in Deutschland“ (in German only) by Jochen Gerhard (2000), which features a list of archives in Germany along with their holdings on Nazi forced labor:

→ http://www.rijo.homepage.t-online.de/pdf/DE_DE_WK2_zw_quellen.pdf

In the volume „Zwangsarbeit in Deutschland 1939 - 1945. Archiv- und Sammlungsgut, Topographie und Erschließungsstrategien“ (in German only), edited by Wilfried Reininghaus and Norbert Reimann (2001), there are various articles about the availability of archival materials and access to Nazi forced labour information. By referring to this book, you can find out about other archival holdings and locate the historical sources you need.

4. HOW TO PREPARE FOR VISITING AN ARCHIVE

Once you have determined which archive or archives to search for the information you need, you will need to understand the internal logic of each archive. Most archives organize their holdings using a structure called “tectonics,” which may be based on periods (such as pre- and post-World War II). In this tectonic inventory, archives have tools like search guides (also called repositories) that list the archive’s holdings with brief descriptions of the items and assigned signatures (abbreviations used when ordering). It is a good idea to consult search guides before making inquiries because they provide an overview of the archive’s contents. In larger archives, search guides are often available online. Some archives have advanced search engines with online search capabilities.

- If you have a specific subject you want to research, it is useful to know which archives may hold sources that relate to your question.
- First, check if the archives you are interested in have an online presence. Some archives may have online search guides or other digital listings of their collections. If so, you can see if there are sources that relate to your question. You should write down the signatures of the sources you want to order. If you are lucky, you might be able to order the documents directly online. If not, you can find contact details or information on how to order.
- If there are no online search guides or inventory lists available, you can make a search enquiry by email or telephone.
- Before you visit an archive, it is important to prepare by ordering any materials you need and booking an appointment. The rules and information for your visit will often be online as well, such as opening hours, where and how to store your bags, whether you can get food there, or how you can take photographs or make photocopies. If you are unsure, don’t hesitate to ask.
- When you visit an archive, it is useful to take a pencil, a notepad, a laptop, some food, and some change. It is important to be aware that your visit may take longer than you expect. Some archives allow you to photograph documents using your own camera, while others require you to order and pay for photocopies.
- A tip: ask the archive and library staff. They are experts on their collections and can tell you about other interesting materials related to your subject and where to find them.