

Karl-Joseph Hummel / Christoph Kösters (Hrsg.):
Zwangsarbeit und katholische Kirche 1939–1945.
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During the Second World War, millions of forced laborers – men and women, adolescents and children – were employed in the German economy. Beginning in the 1980s, historians have conducted intensive research into this topic. The role of the Christian churches, however, was long neglected. Finally, in 2000, the first historical proof that church institutions employed forced laborers emerged. In Germany, the issue suddenly appeared on the agenda of those political elements struggling to secure compensation for forced laborers.

The Catholic Church reacted to the ensuing severe attacks with an initiative that was as extraordinary as it was unparalleled: using all available sources, it attempted to find – and where possible, identify by name – all foreign laborers who had been forced to work in monasteries and other Catholic institutions between 1933 and 1945. The survivors were offered the hand of reconciliation. For the injustice they suffered, they received symbolic compensation of DM 5,000 (or the equivalent in Euros) from the Church's own coffers. Encounters between former victims and (mostly young) Germans were intensively promoted. Lastly, the findings underwent a scholarly analysis and were integrated into the historiography on the forced labor experience in the German Reich. The documentation at hand, *Zwangsarbeit und katholische Kirche 1939–1945* (Forced Labor and the Catholic Church, 1939–1945), is based on the most extensive investigation conducted in the field of Catholic studies over the last several decades.

Historically, this much is certain: the Catholic Church and its installations were connected to the Nazi war economy in a multitude of ways. Yet they did keep a distance – a posture rooted in Christian values – from, for example, the racist crimes perpetrated by a totalitarian, ideologically driven dictatorship.

As they had done during World War I, Catholic hospitals and the homes of monastic orders placed their material and personnel resources at government disposal in 1939, as military hospitals and shelters for children threatened by aerial bombing, as well as for the mending of soldiers' uniforms. In Catholic monasteries and convents, as well as in schools and homes, municipalities and private enterprises put up parts of their administrations and their labor forces, including many forced laborers and prisoners of war. Unlike industrial enterprises,

institutions of the Catholic Church were not considered war-essential operations, though their importance did grow during the course of a war that caused unprecedented destruction and loss of life. But that did not prevent Heinrich Himmler and other anti-Church Nazi leaders from taking large-scale action against Catholic monastic orders. In the course of the so-called *Klostersturm* (Monastery Storm), the regime illegally requisitioned at least 306 such installations throughout the Reich, expelled more than 10,000 monastics from their houses, and expropriated all assets without any compensation.

At the same time that the regime was increasing its demands and hostile actions, Church institutions faced an ever more acute labor shortage. Doctors, nurses, skilled workers, and agricultural laborers who were called up to serve at the military front or on the home front left behind considerable gaps. The Church attempted to fill these by using foreign laborers, who were deported to Germany, especially from Poland and the Soviet Union, as part of the so-called *Reichseinsatz* (Employment in the Reich). During the Second World War, a total of 5,904 forced laborers working in 776 Catholic institutions can be proven through historical sources, 4,829 civilians and 1,075 prisoners of war. Employment of foreign workers in the Church's approximately 4,000 charitable houses and nearly 800 monasteries was, accordingly, by no means the rule. Of the 13.5 million forced laborers in the German economy, far fewer than one in a thousand worked in Catholic Church institutions.

The everyday work that forced laborers performed, particularly housekeeping but also gardening and agricultural labor, for hospitals, homes, and monastic properties differed markedly from the work done in the armaments industry. To be sure, even Catholic hospitals or homes had to operate efficiently in order to fulfill the commissions with which the Church or monastic orders had charged them. But the fundamentally Christian identity of these institutions operated as a palpable brake on the unrelenting exploitation of foreign laborers. Forced laborers were cared for in Catholic hospitals regardless of their »race« or origins. Abortions, which the Nazi regime mandated in the case of women forced laborers who became pregnant, were not performed in Catholic facilities. Last but not least, concern for religious salvation played an essential part in relations with Catholic forced laborers, the great majority of whom were from Poland.

The case of forced laborers working in Catholic installations reveals the ways in which the Church was bound by the everyday compulsions of wartime society in Nazi Germany. Neither »resistance« nor »accommodation« adequately captures the historical reality. »Antagonistic cooperation« and similar formulations that attempt to bridge seemingly contradictory notions come closer to the reality of the Church's experience, especially during the war years.

The historical turning point of 1989–1990 and the unification of Germany at long last created international conditions that made it possible to solve the problem of compensating former foreign forced laborers in the German war economy. Within the Catholic Church, the international peace movement Pax Christi had already embarked on a path of reconciliation with France and Poland in the 1960s. The Maximilian-Kolbe-Werk, which grew out of this initiative and was established in 1973, concentrated on supporting concentration camp survivors in Poland. The Catholic Church's August 2000 decision to pay compensation, offer reconciliation, and engage in remembrance is in keeping with that earlier tradition. Up to December 2004, 587 former forced laborers had received restitution payments totaling 1.5 million Euros. At the same time, the Church had spent 2.71 million Euros in support of 206 different projects that aimed to intensify encounters and reconciliation with victims of Nazi crimes in Europe.