

Axel Drecolli; International Conference: “World War II prisoners in the Nazi and Soviet camps in 1939-1948”; 14-15 May 2015; Vilnius

“Armaments industry, prisoners of war and slave labour. The Second World War and its aftermath”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

After the famous Nuremberg Trial against 24 major war criminals, twelve so called Nuremberg Military Tribunals ensued in the years 1946 to 1949. During these proceedings the second tier perpetrators stood in the dock. The goal was to establish the responsibility and hold to account the crimes committed by the military, economic and political decision makers of the Nazi regime. At the same time chief prosecutor Telford Taylor pursued a pedagogical objective: He wanted to demonstrate that not only Hitler and his closest confidants, but numerous other institutions and persons were responsible for the mass crimes committed by the Nazi regime.

In April 1947 case five in this series of trials began. Six leading representatives of the Flick Concern, one of the largest weapons manufacturers of the “Third Reich”, were brought to trial. For the very first time, international legal proceedings were undertaken against the representatives of private industry, who were to be held responsible for the crimes committed in a dictatorial regime. The focus of the prosecution was on indictment one, the participation in the so called slave labour program. According to Taylor, the accused, with regard to this point, were guilty of labour exploitation and were responsible for the widespread death of thousands of POWs (or prisoners of war). The question of the “Arbeitseinsatz” or deployment of prisoners of war moved to centre stage in one of the most significant legal proceedings in post war German history.

If one considers current research trends, then the themes which were discussed intensely during the proceedings have lost none of their relevance. The issue was not only knowledge by the economic functionaries of the mass murder of prisoners of war. The involvement of top managers in the iniquitous labour deployment program was also at stake. Additionally, the profits that could be gained by and the motives behind the participation in mass crimes against humanity were discussed.

If I, in the following, want to discuss some aspects of the topic armaments industry, prisoners of war and forced labour, using the example of the Flick Concern and the Flick Trial, then I am following two objectives. On the one hand it is about the responsibility of the armaments industry and its managers for the forced labour of prisoners of war during the Third Reich. On the other hand it is about the dispute about responsibility during the judicial proceedings, that is between April and November 1947. The ongoing dispute during the proceedings about the participation of private industry in Nazi mass crimes was also a battle about the interpretation of the Nazi past. In my opinion, the end result of this interpretational discourse contributed decisively to the handling of the theme “prisoners of war and forced labour” in West Germany for decades to come.

Initially the prosecution concentrated on the employment figures. The goal was to characterise the forced labour of prisoners of war as *mass* crimes. Due to the submission of an impressive volume of documents as evidence this could be proven easily and irrefutably.

The figures differed according to the respective production sectors of the subsidiaries in the group. In total the standard level of forced labour in the Flick group, as we know today, was around average for the Germany armaments industry.

The Flick Group consisted of about 100 individual companies in Europe. The focal point of company activity was in coal extraction. As an energy supplier, this was the lifeline for all manufacturing of the Group. With the Harpener Bergbau AG (Harpener Mining Joint Stock Company) and the Essener Steinkohlebergwerke (Essen Black Coal Mines), the concern possessed two of the largest German black coal conveyor plants. With almost 40 000 employees, both belonged to the largest employers in the western German industrial area on the Ruhr.

Already before 1939, the continuously increasing production demands made by the German armaments industry created an almost permanent dearth of labour. After 1939 the call up of German workers to the Wehrmacht (the German Armed Forces) led to an additional aggravation of the situation. Already directly after the start of the war, concern management began to intensively grapple with the deployment of foreign workers. Soon after in fact the workforce of both coal works were a “colourful mixture of ethnic groups” (as Hans-Christoph Seidel phrased it). In 1940 the first prisoners of war from European countries were deployed, but numerically played a minor role.

The situation changed with the increasingly military stagnation of the German Army. There was now a growing awareness that the war could not be won as a Blitzkrieg; also the company management at the end of 1941 calculated with a lengthy period of war and significant requirements made on man and material. This conclusion changed the structure of the mine workforce dramatically. From 1942 to 1944 the number of forced labourers in the mines on the Ruhr increased from on average one percent to almost half of all labourers. In Autumn 1943 half of these forced labourers were Soviet prisoners of war. In this year at the Harpener Bergbau AG there were, for example, about 2 200 deployed forced labourers of which 1 223 were Russian soldiers as well as 83 Belgian prisoners of war and 53 so called Italian military internees. Even more dramatic were the workforce changes in iron and steel production as well as with the armaments manufacturers. The proportion of forced labourers in these areas was on average 50-60% of the total workforce. Up to 1945 in individual factories, the proportion actually increased to 85-90%. Here too, as of 1943 at the latest, especially Soviet but also French, Belgian or Italian prisoners of war were the largest group among the forced labourers in the individual companies. In the years 1943/44 the rail car manufacturer Linke-Hofmann for example deployed over 2 000 forced labourers, about 1 300 of whom were Russian POWs with a further 15% French POWs and 12% Italian military internees. If the high fluctuation rate is taken into account, then between 80 000 and 100 000 people were forced to work in the Flick Concern, arguably almost half being prisoners of war.

In a second step the prosecutors concentrated on the living and working conditions of the POWs and other forced labourers. During the proceedings they were able to invoke intra-Flick-Group written documentation as well as impressive statements made by witnesses. Already in 1947, with the help of this material, the prosecutors picked up on themes that are

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being once again covered by research today. Various theses and interpretations presented by the prosecutor during the proceedings are being confirmed by the results of current studies.

The massive labour deployment of POWs were already planned for the coal producing companies in late Autumn 1941. As the main energy source for the armaments industry they had top priority in the allocation of the workforce. Nevertheless POWs did not play a decisive roll at either Harpener Bergbau AG nor Essener Steinkohlewerke up to 1942. For this, the racist policy of the Nazi government towards POWs from the Soviet Union, the characteristics of which you all know, was mostly responsible. In fact until the end of 1941 the German Wehrmacht had captured over three million Soviet soldiers, who were viewed not as potential workers but as “surplus humans” and “useless eaters”. By February 1942 due to inhuman treatment, two million Russian soldiers had died as a consequence of hunger, cold and sickness.

This policy was reflected in the Flick companies. Initially the complaints about the lack of opportunity to deploy POWs accumulated. Karl Kittelmann, a German worker at Lauchhammer-Werke in eastern Germany, named the reason for this scepticism in court: When the Soviet POWs arrived in Lauchhammer, he saw a “moving funeral procession”. According to Kittelmann, the prisoners exhibited “open wounds and frozen limbs” and lunged “at an elder bush and ate the branches”.

Due to the lack of deployment possibilities, the willingness of corporate management and managers of the individual companies to feed the POWs sank. Malnutrition, infections, epidemics and lack of medical facilities led to a sickness quotient for Soviet POWs of 25% up to 1945. The numbers of those who died during forced labour work was in the hundreds.

The nutritional situation changed during the course of 1942 due to so called “nursing measures”. Over and above this, management at the plants paid more attention to work conditions of Russian POWs by increasing safety measures and implementing teaching courses. Such partial improvements were however coupled to “performance”. Those POWs not fit for work were virtually excluded from medical facilities and food allocation. Brutal sanctions by plant security (Werkschutz) and daily physical abuse by the German permanent staff also lead to a continuous deterioration of living and working conditions. It manifested itself drastically especially in the metal producing concern companies – for instance at the Rombacher Hüttenwerke, where the POWs were regularly beaten and plant security without further ado shot a group of “work shy Red Army soldiers” on the premises.

Due to the overwhelming amount of documents and testimonies that the prosecutor submitted, there was no room for doubt regarding the abominable conditions of the forced labour work of the POWs in the Flick concern. The charge “forced labour and prisoners of war” referred however primarily to one thing: “racial separation” and connected to it: discrimination and mass crimes, which since 1941 were an elementary part of day to day routine and part of normalcy at the daily workplace. Even more: precisely the discrimination policy towards the Red Army POWs indicated that mass crimes up to mass murder before the eyes of the German work force were possible – but not only that. German workers and employees were even directly involved in numerous crimes.

This broad knowledge regarding discrimination policy and the participation in mass crimes was taken up and dealt with separately by the prosecution in its argumentation strategy. In a third step, an attempt was made to portray communication routes, responsibility structures and motivations for behaviour patterns in the Flick concern companies and the group headquarters.

First and foremost, it was the goal for Taylor and his team to convince the court that the private sector was not forced by the Nazi regime to act in this manner. Therefore the prosecution placed emphasis on the special cooperation forms of top management with control and steering committees of state economic institutions. The cooperation between state and the private sector was demonstrated by the prosecution for instance by pointing to the system of “Rings” and “Committees” of the Reich Minister for Armaments and Munitions, Albert Speer. The leading members of the Flick Group were represented there. Important positions were also held by Flick managers in trade associations which had significant clout on the economic policy of the “Third Reich”.

The group representatives used their positions in these half governmental associations and business organisations to achieve higher allocation quotas of forced labourers and POWs. In these positions, they were also involved in the formulation of the basis framework circumscribing the precarious living and working conditions of the forced labourers and POWs. In any case for group managers, the principle of responsibility applied in their own companies. As owners and operating managers, they were responsible for diverse issues: These included board, lodging and medical care. Above all this also included the sophisticated punishment system for POWs. Incentives and autonomy and not primarily pressure and coercion – this was the interpretation the prosecution poignantly used to describe the relationship between the private sector and state regarding the topic forced labour and POWs.

Incentives for profit and independent action also played a leading role in the discussions about the motives of the Flick managers. Taylor himself considered profit maximisation as the real reason behind the willing cooperation of industry in the mass crimes of the Nazi regime. Flick and his managers were not industrial lions with timid hearts. According to him the captains of industry were the opposite: influential and powerful men, who dealt with POWs according to the maxim “the largest possible degree of exploitation at the lowest possible cost”. The sophisticated report and information process within the Flick Group, which the prosecution presented, made clear and unambiguous statements on this point possible. One of the most important Group managers, Bernhard Weiß, referred, among other things, to the advantage of forced labour of “Russian POWs” who could be deployed easily in the short-term. “They can work up to 90 hours a week and one does not have to treat them with kid gloves” said the member of the leadership crew. In August 1943 the commissar for Russian POWs in Eisenwerk Maxhütte informed corporate management of his new implemented allocation system: The categories “industrious, moderate and lazy” served him as a gauge for food ration allocation. “Unproductive elements”, a term which Nazi jargon often used, were to be excluded from the ration allocation chain to enable the “performance level” for “the workforce factor” to be kept at the highest level possible.

However Taylor also had documents that pointed to the importance of ideology as a motive for action. In the Summer of 1941 Ernst Buskühl, General Director of Harpener Bergbau AG,

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initially did everything possible to stop the deployment of POWs. He did not want to see any “auxiliary and Helot people” below ground. The work of the “racially inferior” in his opinion substantially reduced the value of the work of the “German miner”. When in 1942 to 1945 he supported the deployment of POWs, he did so under the banner “no work, no food”. Otto Ernst Flick, the son of the Group founder, even while in the witness stand in Nuremberg subscribed to the opinion that he was not capable of noticing the massive malnutrition among the POWs from eastern Europe in the Rombacher Hüttenwerke which he was managing. The “markedly rounded eastern face type” supposedly hid any sign of malnutrition.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

if we again summarily compare central aspects of the argumentation of the prosecution with some research results, then something particularly comes to attention: In connection with the theme forced labour and widespread death of POWs, the prosecution covered themes and interpretations that historical research in Germany as far as I can see only intensively discussed in the last twenty years, for example the participation of companies and absolutely “ordinary Germans” in crimes against humanity of the regime or were at least aware of these crimes. But above all, the prosecution attempted to point out the complex forms of cooperation between the state and the economy. It cited the incentive systems that National Socialism created for businesses. It underscored the devastating impact of an uninhibited performance-orientated profit capitalism on POWs who were forced to work. And it emphasised the parallel validity of economic profit calculation and ideological racist behaviour norms. That the prosecution and its interpretation of guilt and responsibility of the Flick manager in the end failed, as Telford Taylor had to himself admit, had various reasons (the details of which I am at this moment unable to elaborate on). These included the absolute lack of knowledge on the part of the judges about the Nazi regime, barriers in international law – and the fact that many prosecution witnesses were able to convince the judges of the absolute compulsive character of the regime – if you will, a simple form of totalitarianism theory. Ultimately the judges freed some of the accused, while others received mild sentences. For me most of all it is important to note that already at the end of the 1940s, mass crimes against POWs were intensively discussed and interpreted. For this topic, as otherwise generally assumed, there was no suppression, but on the contrary an intensive debate about the recent past. However, the result of the debate was that today's conventional interpretations were at that point in time rejected and the euphemistic self portrayal of the managers endured – an interpretational consensus that was not changed for decades. Today however, the public perception of the blemish of having been a war criminal is pivotal and not the sentence or the interpretation of the former economic captains – if you like, a late success for the prosecutor.

Thank you for your attention.