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Forced Labor Camps for Jews in Reichskommissariat Ukraine: The Exploitation of Jewish Labor within the Holocaust in the East

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Abstract: Using mainly survivor testimonies, more than 120 forced labor camps for Jews have been identified in Reichskommissariat (Rk) Ukraine, a larger number than previously known. Many were road construction camps along Transit Highway IV, where living conditions were harsh and Jews that fell sick were routinely shot. Similar camps also extended eastward into the Dnipropetrovsk and Cherkasy regions. In addition, a few camps for Jews engaged in bridge construction were established on the fringes of Rk Ukraine, using the labor of Jews from Transnistria. In the Volynia, Rivne, and Brest regions the Germans also established camps for work in agriculture, peat-digging, forestry, lumber, and for skilled craftsmen. The Jews in most of these camps were killed by the end of 1942, either together with the inmates of nearby ghettos, or separately a few weeks later. The location of many camps in the countryside facilitated the escape of some Jews. A few remnant ghettos, such as that in Volodymyr-Volynsky, existed into 1943. Little trace remains of these camps today, even where the Jewish gravesites have been marked by memorial stones.

Keywords: Holocaust, Ukraine, Jewish forced labor

1 Introduction and Methodological Remarks

During the German occupation, thousands of able-bodied Jews were put to work in forced labor camps in many regions of Ukraine. They endured back-breaking labor under harsh conditions with insufficient food and were isolated from their families. Some passed through a series of camps before meeting their deaths in a variety of circumstances. For a small number, the camps provided a narrow bridge

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that could enable them to survive. This article examines the networks of forced labor camps for Jews in Reichskommissariat (Rk) Ukraine.

The German-controlled authorities set up more than 120 forced labor camps for Jews in Rk Ukraine. While a majority of the camps were established for work on road construction, others covered a variety of tasks, including work in agriculture, digging peat, forestry, bridge construction, work as craftsmen, or the sorting of Jewish property in “remnant ghettos.” Although the camps along the so-called Transit Highway (Durchgangsstrasse or DG) IV, for example in the Khmelnytskyi and Vinnitsia regions (oblasts), have been described previously by historians such as Andrej Angrick and Alexander Kruglov, many smaller camps remain largely unknown; and even where memorials have been erected, details of the forced labor conducted there are rarely mentioned (Angrick 2008, 190–223; Kruglov 2001, 191–192). Some Jews were sent longer distances, such as those transferred from Volyn to Kyiv in 1942, while thousands of Romanian Jews from Transnistria were handed over to the German authorities from the summer of 1942 to replace local Jews working on Transit Highway IV that had been worked to death or shot.

Why have these camps remained largely overlooked in the historiography for so long? Apart from the DG IV camps, most regional studies scarcely engage with them at all. One exception is Shmuel Spector’s study of Volhynia, which devotes several pages to some of the larger camps in the region, noting how these camps differed significantly from the ghettos (Spector 1990). Wendy Lower also refers briefly to groups of surviving Jewish laborers in the Zhytomyr region after the final ghettos were liquidated in summer 1942. She stresses, however, the small numbers and notes that “pressure from superiors” ensured that “by the end of 1943 nearly all of these remaining Jewish laborers and their families had been killed” (Lower 2005, 158).

Yet it remains important to document these camps as far as possible. One main reason for this prior neglect is the lack of any preserved German documentation for many of them. If it were not for the postwar German criminal investigations and the testimonies of Jewish survivors that came from Romania and Transnistria, even the DG IV camps would remain poorly documented. Due to this near complete absence of German administrative documentation, as is the case also with many ghettos, this research has had to rely extensively on testimonies and other documentation provided by survivors, including the brief mentions in ITS survivor records that describe the ghettos and camps that they passed through. More recently some corroboration has also been provided by the testimonies of local neighbors interviewed by Yahad-in-Unum. With the aid of these personal testimonies, it has

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1 These figures are incomplete; the full total may never be known as no German records were kept for the smaller agricultural camps, and from some camps there were no survivors.
been possible to identify and describe a number of little-known camps, demonstrating the continued use of selected Jews for work after the main ghetto liquidation actions in specific regions of Rk Ukraine. Although witnesses are sometimes mistaken regarding dates, the details provided by multiple witnesses prove clearly that such camps existed and highlight the perspective of the victims in their daily struggle for survival.

By analyzing the regional patterns of forced labor camps for Jews in Rk Ukraine, the aim is to apply new research to integrate the history of these camps into our understanding of the chronology of the Holocaust. A regional approach is best-suited, as there were diverse types of camps across many regions, but the chronology and fate of these camps was mainly dictated by the local chronology of the German implementation of the Holocaust in each region. Among the questions to be addressed are: why were the camps established, how were they run, and what do Jews recall of their time in the camps? What was the fate of these camps and their inmates in the period 1942–1943, when the forced labor camps for Jews were liquidated? Finally, there will be a brief discussion of the memorialization of these camps today, which underlines the need to document these sites of memory that have been largely neglected for so long.

2 Regional Studies

This article will examine forced labor camps for Jews systematically according to the boundaries of modern-day oblasts or regions within Ukraine and Belarus that formed the Rk Ukraine under German occupation. Due to the regional diversities, it is difficult to give a general overview about the role of the forced labor camps for Jews in the Holocaust in Rk Ukraine. With a few exceptions, most were established after the “first wave” of mass killings conducted by units of the Einsatzgruppen, Order Police and the Waffen SS, with support from the Wehrmacht and local collaborators, which had murdered more than 250,000 Jews by the end of 1941 in those territories that came to comprise Rk Ukraine (Kruglov 2008, 278–279). The process of ghettoization in this region also spread from the late summer of 1941 to the summer of 1942, encompassing more than 230 ghettos altogether (Dean and Megargee 2012). While some camps in the western part of Rk Ukraine were liquidated together with the ghettos or shortly thereafter during the “second wave” of mass shootings in 1942, further east it was more likely that selections conducted during the ghetto liquidations resulted in the establishment of labor camps for Jews able to work, which continued to exist for a number of months thereafter. There were, however, specific exceptions to this general pattern.

An additional complication is the fact that in the Soviet territories occupied by the Germans, a degree of confusion exists about the distinction between forced
labor camps for Jews and ghettos, in part because some Soviet sources choose to define all sites where Jews were confined as ghettos. Furthermore, in some cases, there was considerable overlap between the concept of a ghetto and that of a labor camp. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify certain important differences between the two types of facility. Whereas most ghettos included entire family units, forced labor camps mostly held Jews of working age, who had been selected for work, and that were sometimes segregated by sex. In addition, ghettos were usually located in or near existing places of Jewish residence. The labor camps on the other hand were established at or close to the place of work – in factories, quarries, peat-digging sites, forests, next to roads, railways, or buildings under construction, near workshops or other work locations. Of course, a number of camps were in towns, existing outside of the designated ghetto area, but many were in the countryside some distance from the nearest ghetto. This accounts for the specific role of the camps in facilitating survival for some Jews, especially as camps were not always liquidated at the same time as the ghettos.

A specific hybrid site is the so-called remnant ghetto or “Rest-Ghetto.” These were camps for a few remaining Jews confined in a section of a former ghetto after most of the ghetto inmates had been killed. These Jews were usually retained as labor for sorting out property from the ghetto or conducting other work. These remnant ghettos resembled labor camps more than ghettos, but as they were housed on ghetto sites, their history is usually dealt with as an extension of the history of the ghetto. In some places remnant ghettos were also used to lure Jews out of hiding.

In July 1941, one of the first labor camps for Jews on the territory of what was soon to become Rk Ukraine was established on the estate of Count Ledochowski in Smordva, Volyn, not far from Mlyniv (see Figure 1). The noble estate had been taken over by the Germans and Jews sent there were forced to do agricultural work. According to the Mlyniv yizkor book, around two hundred Jewish men were sent initially to the camp. The work manager, an ethnic German named Gruener, was a cruel sadist: “He would wake the workers in the middle of the night and order them to run up and down stairs. While they were running, he would beat them with an iron whip, causing some to fall down the stairs” (Rudolf 1970, 287–292). Additional Jews were brought to the Smordva camp from Demidivka, Boremel, and Ostrozhets, bringing the total number there to five hundred. Soviet POWs were also incarcerated in Smordva, but the two groups of prisoners were housed separately (YVA, Mendelkern; BA-L, Schmulewitsch).

Former prisoner Jochak Mandelkern recalled the harsh conditions in the camp. Rations included a bitter-tasting grass soup. Those prisoners who did not drink it fast enough were shot on the spot. Many Jewish prisoners died or were killed
during the camp’s existence. They were then replaced by more Jewish laborers from Mlyniv and elsewhere.\footnote{GARF, 7021-71-60, pp. 5–7, reports some 600 people buried in Smordva, but this figure includes Soviet POWs.}

A local inhabitant, interviewed in 2011, recalled that the camp was surrounded by a wooden fence with barbed wire. On the estate there were large potato plantations. Every morning the Jewish prisoners were escorted to the fields by Germans and members of the local police. The Jews were frequently subjected to abuse and humiliation. On one occasion they were forced to bathe in the river in mid-winter (YIU, # 1373).

In early October 1942, after all the Soviet POWs had died or been killed, the Smordva camp was dissolved and remaining Jewish prisoners were transferred to Demidyvka, where they were shot with the other Jews of the ghetto (BA-L, Schmulewitsch). The fate of the Smordva camp established for agricultural work demonstrates that many such camps were dissolved, and the inmates returned to the ghettos just before the second wave of mass shootings, which in Volyn, Rivne, and Khmelnytskyi regions took place in the late summer and fall of 1942.

Many camps for Jews in Rk Ukraine were established for road construction work. Along the so-called Transit Highway or DG IV that ran from Ternopil in Eastern Galicia via Uman to Dnipro, there were more than 30 camps scattered along its route, many of which used Jewish forced laborers. Some Jews were initially assigned to this work from nearby towns and villages in the fall of 1941. For

\textbf{Figure 1:} Forced labor camps for Jews in the Rivne region.
example, the Chukiv camp received around 100 local Ukrainian Jews at this time (BA-L, Petra). However, it was not until spring 1942 that the German construction authority (Organisation Todt) and the Police Security Section of the DG IV began to expand construction operations along the highway and by this time few local Jews remained alive that could be assigned to the work.

Local Jews were sent from the Uman ghetto to several DG IV camps in the Haisyn area, on the ghetto’s liquidation in May 1942. Further east along the stretch between Kryvyi Rih and Dnipro Jews were also sent to the camps from remaining local communities in spring 1942. In the west between Letychiv and Pidvolochisk, the ghettos were not liquidated until the late summer of 1942 and additional Jews were sent from the ghettos to DG IV camps in the region in August (Angrick 2008, 204–205).

Due to the shortage of laborers for work on the DG IV, in August 1942 Franz Christoffel, the German Inspector of Construction for Zone Haisyn, crossed the Buh River into the Romanian-occupied southern part of the Vinnytsia region and brought back some 3000 Jews for the DG IV camps in Rk Ukraine (Angrick 2008, 207). Soon after the arrival of these Jews from Transnistria, selections were conducted of those unfit for work, who were then shot. As a few of these Jews managed to survive, much of what we know about the camps comes from the testimony of Jews brought in from Transnistria, many of whom had been previously deported from Romania.

Historian Alexander Kruglov has described the conditions in the camps along the DG IV in the Vinnytsia region in 1942–1943. The Jewish forced laborers were accommodated in improvised camps, such as stables and other sheds designed for cattle, school buildings, or a former synagogue. They were fed mainly a pea or potato soup, supplemented with a little millet or horse flesh. Some meals consisted only of warm water and occasionally a chunk of bread. “The prisoners were working either at the highway construction site, or in a nearby quarry, sandpit, or gravel pit. The road had to be broadened to the width of 8 m and strengthened with crushed rock and gravel.” Among the main tasks were extracting and breaking up rocks in the quarries, loading and unloading sand and gravel, spreading it along the highway, and clearing the road from snow in the winter. The workday was 8–10 h. Prisoners who were injured, sick, or too weak to work were routinely shot by the German and Lithuanian police assigned to guard the camps and oversee the work that was supervised by German civil engineers from the Organisation Todt (Kruglov 2001, 190–191).

A network of similar forced labor camps for Jews existed also in the Dniprpetrovsk region along the road from Kryvyi Rih to Dnipro (Figure 2).

These camps existed from around May 1942 until the end of 1942 or early in 1943. One of the last camps to be liquidated was at Lyubymivka. Here, as in many camps, the majority of the 600 prisoners were Jewish women. The survivor, Raisa
Ul’man (née Pustil’nik) recalled: “We worked from 5:00 A.M. until 4:00 P.M. Living conditions and food in the camp were terrible. Dinner after work consisted of 1 L of water and 100 g of bread. At work they beat us with whips. On the way back to the camp they would kill some of us and bury the bodies near the camp. The camp was in a brick building with a cement floor covered in straw. The building was surrounded by a double-layered barbed-wire fence. Latvian auxiliaries guarded the camp. I did not have enough space to sleep inside the building, so I slept in the attic with about 300 other people. In the attic there was a solid floor, so we slept up there. People who were sick, or did not have any clothes or shoes, stayed in the building [and did not go to work]. All of these people were killed and thrown into a silage pit” (GARF, Pustil’nik).\(^3\)

Local witness, Danil Nemchenko, confirmed that the silage pit was covered with earth again in the spring of 1943. He added: “Two Jewish girls told me that the soldiers took them on as cooks but every day they abused them sexually. I advised them to escape. They escaped but were recaptured… and killed near the silage pit. After all the Jews had been killed, the Germans forced us to clean the pigsty [where the Jews had been housed]. I also had to take part. When we entered the pigsty, there was blood up to our knees. Apart from the blood, there were also bullet holes in the walls. After cleaning it, the Germans made us whitewash the walls, to cover up their crimes” (GARF, Nemchenko).

\(^3\) See also VHA, # 35024. A description of the shooting can be viewed here: https://yahadmap.org/en/#village/lyubymivka-dnipropetrovsk-ukraine.165.
In 1942–1943 the German authorities established at least 16 forced labor camps for Jews in [present-day] Cherkasy region (Figure 3); the Jewish prisoners in these camps were mostly engaged in road construction. One camp was created in Smilchyntsi, 80 km northeast of Uman in the summer of 1942. Around 150 people were transferred here from the Nemoroż camp. Originally, they came from the Zvenyhorodka ghetto in May 1942, shortly before its liquidation on June 18 (Dean and Megargee 2012, 1611–1612).

After the arrival of new prisoners from Vil’shana [Ol’shana], the Nemoroż camp was divided, and half the inmates were moved to Smilchyntsi. Prisoners at Smilchyntsi worked on the road in the forest between the Smilchyntsi and Nemoroż camps. They worked seven days a week in all weathers, using shovels and pickaxes to break rocks and excavate the ground. In the winter, prisoners cleared snow from the road (VHA, # 34375, # 34459, # 35203, # 37428, and # 36880).

Work was directed by a German civilian engineer named Hans and the prisoners were guarded by Germans with dogs (VHA # 36880). In the Smilchyntsi camp, the Jewish workers were housed in a long stable that had previously been used to hold cattle and pigs. The prisoners slept on straw on the bare ground. In the winter, everyone slept together for warmth. The camp compound was encircled with barbed wire and surrounded by a field.

The camp commandant was a German named Borkenhagen. Ukrainian police and Germans guarded the camp. Survivors recall a German guard named Vassar and
the camp commandant’s translator – a woman named Lida. According to Grunia Medvinskaia, Vassar was in love with a Jewish girl in the camp and was kind to the inmates, bringing extra food to those who were about to be killed. Lida, however, was a cruel woman who punished prisoners she considered not to be working sufficiently hard. Inmates were given hot water in the morning and were fed only once or twice a day. They received pea soup every day and horsemeat once a month. The soup was very watery, and the accompanying bread was blue with mold. Inmates often snuck into a nearby village to beg for scraps. When they were caught by the guards, they were given 25 lashes. However, the threat of being beaten was outweighed by the fear of starvation (VHA, # 34375, # 34459, # 35203, # 37428, and # 36880).

The Jews were not provided with uniforms. Many did not have such basic winter necessities as coats or hats. After a mass shooting at the camp in November 1942, camp officials gave the clothes of the dead to the survivors. Although it was strictly forbidden, Christians in the nearby village gave old clothing and food to the Jews. Conditions in the camp were extremely unhygienic, and prisoners had to be accompanied by guards when they bathed. At night, the inmates gathered to tell stories and sing. They sang songs about the prewar years, postwar hopes, hunger, and those who had perished. The guards generally did not harass the inmates at night. Some incidences of courtship occurred in Smilchyntsi. Ida Gopshteyn reports that two couples, including one inmate-guard couple, became romantically involved in the camp and subsequently escaped (VHA, # 34375, # 34459, # 35203, # 37428, and # 36880).

Death was commonplace in the Smilchyntsi camp. Random selections and shootings were frequent. The prisoners were forced to dig their own graves. Many inmates also died from sickness and exhaustion. Lyuba Krasilovskaia recalled that four sick inmates, who did not report for work, were taken into an empty building and shot by German policemen. Few Jews escaped successfully from Smilchyntsi because the surrounding region was inhospitable. For every single escapee, 10 prisoners were shot as a reprisal. Though they knew that their departure would result in the deaths of others, many prisoners tried to run away (VHA, # 34375, # 34459, # 35203, # 37428, and # 36880).

According to Grunia Medvinskaia, the camp guards could be very brutal. One guard beat the prisoners for not working hard enough on the road. Those who moved too slowly, he struck with his rifle butt. One victim suffered a fractured skull. On November 2, 1942, 50 older people were selected from the camp. They were taken to Nemorozh and included in the liquidation of that camp. Local Ukrainians who witnessed the killings stated that the victims were forced to lie down in the grave on top of the dead bodies, five at a time, and were then shot. Ten prisoners from Smilchyntsi were sent to fill in the graves. After the massacre, when a car arrived at Smilchyntsi to deliver the clothing of the dead, inmates watched as the translator
Lida selected the finest garments for herself. Following the killings many surviving inmates, consumed with grief, were unable to eat or sleep. Later that same month some prisoners were transferred to the Budyszcze camp, where they again worked on road construction (VHA, # 34375, # 34459, # 35203, # 37428, and # 36880).

On August 23, 1943, the remaining prisoners in Smilchyns were driven toward Nemorož, and were then shot close to the forest. Local inhabitant Lyuber O. describes how prisoners from Smilchyns were taken away to be shot: “I lived not so far from the stable; my house was 500 m away. One day, I saw them being forced out of the stable and taken in the direction of the ravine. They carried shovels. Afterwards, I learned that they were forced to dig their own grave. It was already cold, and the ground was muddy. The poor things walked barefooted in the mud” (YIU # 2753U).

Some inmates got wind of the liquidation and escaped before the massacre occurred. Some of those who fled were hidden by partisans or sympathetic Ukrainians and managed to survive until the arrival of the Red Army later that year (VHA, # 34375, # 35203, and # 36880). We know about many of the camps in Cherkasy region thanks to interviews conducted by Boris Zabarko and others working for the Shoah Foundation after the collapse of Communism. Before then most Jewish victims dared not speak openly about their wartime experiences in the Soviet Union for fear of punishment.

In the Buky camp (Cherkasy region), survivor, Galina Klotsman from Piatigory, mentions receiving help from local non-Jews, who brought clothes and food to the Jewish prisoners. She notes that there were many shootings at the camp and when people “volunteered for lighter work,” they were killed instead. There were also Jews acting as “Kapos,” who helped the police and were cruel to the other prisoners. According to Klotsman, by the fall of 1943, shortly before the area’s liberation, only around 50 Jews were still alive in the Buky camp, where the main work consisted in quarrying stone for road construction. By this time, she was unable to work, so she remained in the barrack each day. In the end, she managed to escape with the assistance of some Ukrainian policemen, who told the inmates they would not intervene if the Jews attempted to flee (USHMM, RG-50.226*0015).

In addition to the above-mentioned camp in Smordva, the German authorities established several other camps that were focused on agriculture in the regions of Volyn and Rivne. For example, in the second half of 1942, the Germans established a forced labor camp for Jews in Lavriv, 16 km southwest of Lutsk. This camp held 30 Jews from the Lutsk ghetto, who worked collecting the harvest and threshing it. The German who ran the camp, “Lieutenant Bassner,” was constantly drunk and mocked the prisoners. For sport he would fire shots into the barn, where the prisoners slept. On several occasions Ukrainian villagers came to the camp to beat and rob the Jewish prisoners (AŽIH, 301/5657).
Another agricultural camp for Jews was established in May 1942 on an estate near Ostrozhets. The workers, including Jewish women, were locked in a barn overnight and overseen by a Polish estate manager. As they worked in the fields all day binding sheaves, Germans yelled at them to work harder. The Jewish prisoners received very little food, just a few pieces of bread, and some escaped at night to go out begging for food. At the time of the liquidation of the Ostrozhets ghetto, the workers on the estate were also shot nearby, apart from a few that managed to escape (Papper 1996, 47–51).

As many of the Jews in forced labor camps conducted work in the countryside, this offered opportunities to escape. For example, dozens of young Jews from the ghettos in Mlyniv and Ostrozhets were sent to cut peat at a camp in Studyanka, 12 km north of Kremenets. The young men and women were housed separately in barns and were guarded by Ukrainian police at work. While the men cut the peat into square blocks, the women piled these into high stacks to dry. Morris Kozak, aged 18 at the time, used one of these stacks to escape. At the end of the day, he crawled into a stack and hid, just before the workers were escorted back to the camp. From Studyanka he made his way back to the Mlyniv ghetto (VHA, # 18474).

The main wave of ghetto liquidations in Generalkommissariat Volhynia-Podolia took place from August to November 1942. At a meeting of the District Commissars held in Lutsk at the end of August, it was explained that the planned “100 per cent clearance” was on the express order of Reichskommissar Erich Koch. A “stay of execution” for up to two months was permitted only for small groups of vital workers, not to exceed 500 people (Dean 2000, 93). Accounts by the few
survivors of the forced labor camps in these regions, together with other sources such as German and Soviet investigative material, confirm that these time limits were strictly adhered to. Jews were either transferred from the rural camps back to the ghettos shortly before the date of the liquidation, or the camps were liquidated separately by shooting the Jews nearby, either at the same time or within the two-month limit. Most remnant ghettos were also dissolved within two months. It should be stressed, however, that working in these rural camps offered a few Jews the chance to escape shortly before the mass shootings, especially if they received some advanced warning.

In July 1942 a forced labor camp for Jews was established in Polyany (Rivne region), about half-way between Malynsk and Berezne. Jewish men from Malynsk were ordered to prepare a bundle of clothes and food and then marched to the camp in Polyany under armed guard. Their women and children were transferred to the Berezne ghetto. In Polyany the Jewish men were forced to “work as lumberjacks and fell trees needed for the German war effort” (Weisbarth 2004, 17–28).

On August 25, 1942, German and Ukrainian police liquidated the Berezne ghetto, shooting all the Jews. When news of this reached the Polyany camp, Hershl Weisbarth escaped with a few other men to find out if the rumor was true. The camp was only lightly guarded, and they escaped into the forest. Hershl soon met up with part of his family, including his wife and his son, Benjamin, who had managed to escape from the Berezne ghetto in time. The men who escaped from the camp with Hershl then formed a small Jewish partisan unit that resisted the Germans in the forests around Malynsk. It is possible that the camp in Polyany existed for another two months (Weisbarth 2004, 17–28; ITS, 6.3.3.2, TD 305674).

On June 12, 1942, Regina Sztern was sent with a group of 120 Jewish female and male youths to work at a labor camp on the farm in Bryshche, 8 km southwest of Rozhyshche, Volyn region (Figure 4). This assignment was organized by a German agricultural leader and the Jews were working in the fields. Regina recalled that they worked very hard for little food (AŻIH, 301/2172). The Rozyshche ghetto was liquidated around August 22, 1942 (Zik 1976, 15 and 39), when a unit of the Security Police and SD from Lutsk assisted by German Gendarmerie and Ukrainian police shot most of the Jews – in excess of 3000 people. The Jews were transported from the ghetto to the killing site in trucks. Some of the Jews killed were collected from the surrounding estates or work camps.4 On the Bryshche farm, Regina Sztern

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4 DAVO, R2-1-196, pp. 218a-b, Report to Generalkommissar Wolhynien u. Podolien on gasoline supplies for the “special treatment” of Jews in Gebiet Luzk, August 27, 1942; in the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission (ChGK) report for the Rozhshiche raion, mention is made of 4600 Jews being shot (GARF, 7021-55-11, p. 66), but this figure appears too high. Zik 1976, 42, mentions trucks collecting Jews who had been working in the surrounding villages.
recalled that a detachment of Ukrainians and German SS-men came to collect them, but most of the 120 Jewish workers ran away and they captured only 30 girls. Regina then went into hiding for a time in Bryshche. Subsequently she hid in the house of a guard named Jekim Bojko and then later found refuge in Michalin, where she pretended to be a refugee and assumed a non-Jewish identity (AŽIH, 301/2172). Of the 60 workers digging peat at another camp at Dorosyni 18 km west-northwest of Rozyshche, only six managed to escape at the time of the round up and avoid being killed with the rest of the ghetto’s Jews (Zik 1976, 304–306).

Many Jews were sent from the Lokachi ghetto in Volyn to work camps in the surrounding area in the summer of 1942. For example, at least 30 Jewish men were sent to the Sadiv Forest, around 10 km southwest of Torchyn, to work in forestry. As they were dependent on the ghetto for food, small groups returned periodically to replenish their supplies. Michael Diment notes that on August 26, 1942, a group of workers returned from the Sadiv Forest, including Kos Finkel, who had just escaped from the liquidation of the Torchyn ghetto. Then on September 2, a man named Yecheskel returned from Sadiv with news of the situation in the forest. He warned that it was not easy for Jews to survive, as most peasants resented the raids on their crops. As Michael Diment remembers, he concluded: “Even if we are doomed, we should fight to the end for the honor of our wives, our children, and our people.” He then said farewell to his family and returned to Sadiv. Others could not go with him, as he only had a pass for two people. A few days before the liquidation of the Lokachi ghetto on September 9, the remaining workers from the camps were brought back to the ghetto under guard. Diment recalls: “From the Sadiv site only 14 men were brought back. Sixteen escaped and one was shot; we did not know who it was.” A number of Jews also escaped from the ghetto into the Sadiv Forest, as this area offered good cover for them to hide (Diment 1992, 109–110, 113–114, and 120).

In some locations the Jews were shot directly in the vicinity of the camps where they worked. This was the case, for example, for some of the more than 11 camps for Jews established in the Brest region (now Belarus) in the northwest of Rk Ukraine (Figure 5). On June 1, 1942, the German Labor Office in Brest reported that several hundred male and female Jewish workers had been mobilized from the local ghettos and were deployed in road construction camps supervised by the Organisation Todt (OT) (ITS, 1.2.7.5, fol. 1, 185–187). The camp in Velikorita, 36 km southeast of Brest, was established in May. We know that it was liquidated on October 25, 1942, 10 days after the destruction of the Brest ghetto, due to reports filed by the 11th Company of German Police Regiment 15. In total 15 Jewish men and 66 Jewish women from the Velikorita road construction camp were killed (GARF, 7021-148-4, 208 verso). At a trial conducted in Schwerin (East Germany) in 1983, defendant Josef Böhle of the 11th Company recalled that his unit drove to a complex
of buildings near Velikorita, where 60–70 people were assembled in the courtyard. Dettmann, the squad leader, issued orders for his unit to shoot the Jewish workers. The Jews were loaded onto trucks and transported to a clearing in the forest. Here the German policemen shot them in groups of 10 or 12 into a pit (*DDR-Justiz und NS-Verbrechen* 2002, vol. I, Lfd. Nr. 1007a, 192–194; and ITS 1.2.7.6, fol 1, p. 178).

In the Radastava lumber camp (Brest region), established on April 1, 1942, the liquidation operation took place about three weeks after the destruction of the nearby ghetto in Drahicyn on October 15, 1942. Radastava is located 16 km south of Drahicyn, and after the liquidation of the ghetto, some escaped Jews made their way to the camp. On their arrival the German commandant reassured all the workers that their labor was needed, and he would not turn them over to the Gestapo. However, new Ukrainian workers arrived daily to be trained to replace the Jews engaged in building timber rafts for shipping lumber on the river. So, the Jews understood that their days in the camp were strictly numbered (Varshavski 1958, 298–303). Members of a Luftwaffe unit in Radastava urged the Jews to flee. Yet because some of the Jews were sick, the group decided not to precipitate the “Aktion” by escaping prematurely. Instead, the Jews prepared hiding places with local farmers and kept watch at night to avoid being surprised. On the morning of November 4, a column of German vehicles arrived as the Jews were leaving the camp for work. Immediately, a number of Jews fled, and several were mown down by machine-gun fire as they ran. About 40 of the 120 inmates made good their escape. Most of these people, however, were soon caught by local non-Jews and killed. Others died in their hiding places from cold, hunger, and disease in the winter of
1942–1943. Only about 15 of the escapees survived the first winter in the forests, and even fewer remained when the Germans were driven from the area in 1944. Among the survivors was Zina Gelman (née Adler), who had been sent to Radastava from Drahicyn on the establishment of the camp in April 1942 (ITS, 6.3.3.2, TD 263829).

Only a handful of remnant ghettos have been recorded for the regions of Brest, Volyn, and Rivne, and there is some overlap with camps or artisan sections that were established alongside the ghettos in a few places. For example, in Pinsk the District Commissar prepared a list of four hundred skilled workers for the plywood and match factories that were to be spared, but many of these people were included in the ghetto liquidation operation that started on October 29, 1942. In practice only around one hundred skilled Jewish workers were transferred to the jail, where they survived the “Aktion,” although they were soon joined by additional Jews who then emerged from hiding. After 11 days, the Jews from the jail were sent to a “remnant ghetto” in the Karlin Yeshiva building. Around 140 Jews lived here for over a month, some of them working as craftsmen. The Jews knew, however, that their time had come when tailor Leibl Sherman’s workshop stopped receiving new orders and customers came to pick up their unfinished clothing. The remaining Jews were murdered on December 23, 1942, at the Karlin cemetery (Dean and Megargee 2012, 1443–1444).

Some camps for Jewish craftsmen were established before the ghetto liquidation operations. In Tsuman, according to the recollection of a non-Jewish resident: “Many Jewish men were forced to perform manual work. They were not only Jews from Tsuman, but also others brought from the nearby village of Zofiivka, located 15 km from here, and from Sylne. I know that about 25 or 30 Jewish craftsmen were taken to the local factory, where they were forced to work along with the local non-Jewish population making carts. They worked 10 h a day. I don’t know if they were guarded, but I think they were, otherwise they would have escaped. There was a person in charge who gave them tasks and showed them how to work” (YiU, # 1777).

Additional sources indicate that some of the Jewish craftsmen in Tsuman were subsequently transferred to the forced labor camp in Lutsk (ITS, 6.3.3.2, TD 317056). The camp for Jewish craftsmen in Lutsk had been established in the Krasne suburb in 1941 and continued to exist after the liquidation of the Lutsk ghetto in August. Jews from the camp were used to clear out the ghetto area, but those Jews that emerged from hiding during these operations were collected and shot soon afterwards.

When the Lutsk labor camp was liquidated on December 12, 1942, those Jews unable to flee in time decided to fight back. Two carpenters named Guz and Schulman, and a tinsmith named Moshe, organized a resistance movement. Moshe argued: “Let me die with the Philistines. We shall not go like cattle to the slaughter. Jews, take axes, knives, anything you can lay your hands on, and we
shall die with honor” (Spector 1990, 219). The inmates had one handgun, axes, knives, and some acid; the fighting lasted for several hours. Eventually the carpentry shop was set on fire (probably by German hand grenades), after which the inmates committed suicide or attempted to flee the camp. However, most were either murdered immediately or captured and taken away in trucks to be shot in mass graves (Sefer Lutsk 1961, 399, 441, 517–518). In the Kostopil labor camp for Jews working in the lumber industry, many fled, and others barricaded the camp and offered armed resistance when the Germans arrived to liquidate the camp along with the ghetto on August 26, 1942.

Some Jews were transported long distances to conduct work in forced labor camps. In the first months of 1942, Jews from Volyn were sent hundreds of kilometers to camps in Kyiv and Vinnytsia for work.\(^5\) As almost none of these Jews survived, little is known about conditions in these camps. One of the projects they worked on in Kyiv was the construction of a bridge across the river Dnipr. Other large bridge construction projects used Jewish labor at a variety of sites on the borders of Rk Ukraine, including Tamashouka (Belarus), Semenky, Trikhaty, and Varvarivka. Jews were also brought in to work on these construction projects from some distance, mainly from the ghettos in Romanian-administered Transnistria. Although the camps at Semenky, Trikhaty, and Varvarivka were located outside of Rk Ukraine, across the Buh River in Transnistria, they were guarded by the German Police and run by the Organisation Todt, such that conditions were similar to the camps along the DG IV inside Rk Ukraine. However, more Jews survived here than in the camps inside Rk Ukraine, as many Jews were returned to ghettos in Transnistria when they became sick or once the camps were closed.

The camp at Slyvyne for the construction of a bridge across the River Buh to Mikolaiv was established only in May 1943. After several weeks, once new barracks had been completed, the Jewish prisoners were moved to a new camp at Varvarivka, as this was the main work site. In the camp the inmates were guarded by Ukrainians supervised by four SS-men. Michael Drechsler arrived there from the Obodovca ghetto in Transnistria in late June 1943 (ITS, 1.2.7.2, fol. 5, 183). He recalled: “every day we received in the evening 150 g of cornmeal without salt or water. Afterwards we received a glass of water each.” As the local peasants observed prisoners dying of exhaustion, they would place pieces of bread or fruit out for the Jews on the road. In response the German commandant ordered that any prisoner who dared to pick up the food would be shot. After six months, Drechsler became injured and was sent back to Obodovca (USHMM, RG-14.101M.2171.344-345, 565).

\(^5\) On the transfer of Jews from Volyn to Vinnytsia, see BA-L, Katz; on the transfers to Kyiv, see BNA, TNA, HW 16/6, part 1: summary of German Police Decodes, 16.1. – 15.2.1942, p. 11; HW 16/33, German Police Decodes, 30.1.1942, item 32; Altman 2009, 166; and Miron 2010, 842.
According to German reports, by September 1943 only 1175 Jews remained of the 1432 that had arrived there from Transnistria up to July. Ten had escaped; two had died; 11 had been executed; and 234, unfit for work, had been returned to the Romanian authorities. In October, an additional 489 Jews were supplied by the Romanians (Ancel 2003, vol. I, 326). In January 1944, as the front line was approaching Mikolaiv, the Germans transferred the remaining Jews to the Romanian authorities, who then sent them back to camps and ghettos in Transnistria, including the Bershad ghetto. Regarding the return journey, Saul Landau recalled: “we were loaded into cattle cars and taken from Varvarivka to Mohyliv-Podil’s’kyi. During the journey many people died from weakness and malnutrition and at every stop we had to throw the dead out of the wagons” (USHMM, RG-14.101M.2171.326-327, 596–597).

The camps along Transit Highway IV across the Buh in the Vinnytsia region (Rk Ukraine) were mostly liquidated during the course of 1943 or earlier. Any escapees were hunted down, such that few survived to experience the liberation from German occupation. Romanian Jews from Transnistria were brought to the Ivanhorod camp (Cherkasy region) in 1942 and 1943 to work on road construction. The camp was located in a former school building encircled with barbed wire. Prisoners at the camp were plagued by an epidemic of typhus and some sick prisoners were transferred to the nearby Krasnopilka camp in April 1943 to be shot along with other prisoners of that camp. Jewish survivors indicate that the Ivanhorod camp was liquidated in December 1943, when all remaining prisoners were killed. Esfir’ Kotliar recalls that one of the women who lived with the commandant warned the prisoners at the worksite in mid-December that the camp would soon be liquidated. A group of prisoners then cut the wire fence and fled. Kotliar states that by this time, the majority of the Germans had left the camp. Those Jews who remained were loaded onto trucks and driven away to be shot. Several hundred people were killed in Ivanhorod during the camp’s existence (VHA, # 26075, # 29531; and # 45249).

One of the last camps for Jews to be liquidated in Rk Ukraine was in Volodymyr-Volyns’kyi. In November 1942, following liquidation of the ghetto, officially around 800 Jewish skilled workers remained, housed in a remnant ghetto or labor camp consisting of 17 buildings. Another 200 or so lived there illegally. The remnant ghetto was not enclosed, and the Jews no longer wore markings. The skilled laborers worked as shoemakers, haberdashers, tailors, carpenters, masons, and photographers. There was a bakery, a small distillery, a laundry, and workshops making brushes, signs, and suitcases. The Jews lived in overcrowded conditions and suffered from disease in the camp for more than one year. On December 13, 1943, the final “Aktion” began. Sonderkommando 4b and its auxiliaries stormed the camp. The Jews were taken to the local prison, forced to undress, and then loaded onto trucks. They were driven to a wooded area near Falemyche, where they were shot.
Around 1000 Jews were murdered in this “Aktion”. The Germans subsequently burned the corpses (Pinkas Ludmir 1962, 87, 611; Muzychenko 2015, 183; and AŽIH, 301/2014, 10).

3 Conclusions

More than 120 camps were established altogether in Rk Ukraine in the period 1941–1943. According to current regional boundaries their distribution was as follows. In the Volyn region, there were at least 15 camps, several of them for work in agriculture (Berezoluky, Bryshche, Dorosyni, Kholoniv, Kovel, Lavriv, Luts’k-Krasne, Ozyutychi, Ratne, Rozhyshche, Sadiv Forest, Ustyluh, Volodymyr-Volynsky, Vorotniv, and Zabolottya). In the Rivne region there were at least 10 camps (Khmelivka, Kostopil, Malynsk, Omelyana, Ostrozhets, Pereverediv, Polyany, Smordva, Studynka, and Tynne). In the Brest region (Belarus) there were at least 11 camps (Aleksandrovo (now Dambrouka), Bulkova, Khadasy, Charnau-chytsy, Kobryn, Piatrovicy, Radastava, Tamashouka, Tryshyn (now part of Brest), Velikorita, and Zaprudy). In the Khmelnytskyi region, at least 14 camps were established (Berezdiv, Dunaivzy, Hannopil’, Heletyntsi, Khmelnytskyi (aka Proskurov), Letychiv, Lezneve, Matskyvtsy, Orlinzy, Pavlykyvtsyi, Pechyvody, Slavuta, Volochysk, and Zinkiv). In the Zhytomyr region, including remnant ghettos, there were at least seven camps (Berdychiv, Myropil’, Novohrad-Volynskyi, Ruzhyn, Sukhovolya, Vchoraische, and Zhytomyr). In Vinnytsia region, the German authorities established at least 35 camps, many of them for road construction (Berezivka, Buhakiv, Chukiv, Haisyn, Hushchynetsi, Illints, Kalynivka, Karabelivka, Khmilnyk, Kiblych, Kolo-Mikhalovka (now Stryzhavka), Kozyatyn, Krasnopolka, Kunka, Litin, Makhnivka (aka Komsomolskoe), Mykhailivka, Naraivka, Nemryiv (two camps), Nizhcha Kropyvnya, Pohorila, Raigorod, Tarasivka, Teplyk, Udych, Vinnytsia (five camps), Voronovytysya, Yakushynetsi, Zarudints, and Zarvants). In addition there were three more camps administered by the German authorities inside the Romanian-controlled part of Vinnytsia region, where Jews were engaged in road and bridge construction (Semenky and Bratslav (two camps)).

Further east the number of camps for Jews was somewhat less. In Dnipropetrovsk region there were at least nine camps, mostly linked to road construction (Dnipro, Lyubymivka, Nadezhdivka, Novopillya (formerly Novoukrainka), Novoselivka, Novoyulivka, Shyroke, Sofivka, and Vil’nyi Posad). In Cherkasy region at least 16 camps were established, most connected to road construction (Brodetskoe, Buki, Iskrene, Ivanhorod, Kam’yanka, Kuzymna Hreblea, Mala Sevastyanivka, Monastyrshche, Nemorozh, Oradivka, Ositna, Shostakove,
Smilchyntsi, Talalaivka, Uman, and Yerky). In Mikolaiv region there were two camps inside Rk Ukraine (Hurivka and Pervomais’k), and another two camps run by the Germans in Romanian-controlled Transnistria for bridge construction across the Buh River (Varvarivka (and Slyvyne), and Trikhaty). In and around the city of Kyiv there were at least 4 labor camps for Jews. In Kirovohrad region there were at least 3 camps (Holovanivs’k, Mala Vyska, and Nova Praha). In Poltava region there was at least 1 camp (Khorol).

Only very few of the memorials to Jewish victims of the Holocaust in Ukraine mention the existence of these forced labor camps, some of which are also referred to as “ghettos.” As a number of camp locations were also the gravesites of camp inmates, there are now memorials close to the sites of several camps. For example, after the war a memorial to the murdered Jews was erected close to the Nemorozh camp. Since 1989, a few more such memorials have been added. Thus in 1994 a memorial was erected at the site of the mass shooting in Vorotniv. On its façade is a text in Ukrainian and Hebrew, noting that here are buried 133 Jews, who were shot on December 31, 1942. In Lavriv a memorial was placed at the site of the mass shooting in 2003 (Nakonechnyi 2007, 12, 19, and 30). However, for many sites, no memorial whatsoever exists today. In 2011, French historian Marie Moutier-Bitan visited the site of the road construction camp at Chukiv, near Nemyriv. She reported that there was no memorial at this site, only a plowed field. Unfortunately, this is typical for many of the sites of forced labor camps for Jews, whose history may soon be forgotten completely by the current residents of these places.

As the German authorities kept few records of these mostly improvised forced labor camps for Jews, much of their history can only be reconstructed from the memoirs and testimonies of Jewish survivors and other local witnesses. Of the 120 sites, many of the road construction camps along the so-called Transit Highway IV have been documented previously by historians. Here living conditions were harsh, Jews that fell sick were routinely shot, and additional Jewish laborers were brought in from Romanian-controlled Transnistria. Less well-known are the road construction camps established further east in the Dniprpetrovsk and Cherkasy regions, some of which existed into 1943. The road construction camps to some extent formed a network, as Jews were transferred from one camp to another according to the progress of the project. In addition, the same German authorities established a few camps for Jews engaged in bridge construction on the fringes of Rk Ukraine, across the Buh River; these camps resembled those for road construction, using the labor of Jews from Transnistria. A greater proportion of these Jews managed to survive, as remaining Jewish forced laborers were returned to ghettos and camps in Romanian-controlled Transnistria, on the retreat of the German forces in 1943–1944.
In the western section of Rk Ukraine (Volyn, Rivne, and Brest regions) the Germans established a number of camps for work in agriculture, peat-digging, forestry, lumber, and for skilled craftsmen, only a few of which have been previously documented. The Jews in most of these camps were killed by the end of 1942, either together with the inmates of nearby ghettos, or separately a few weeks later. The location of these camps in the countryside enabled a few of the Jews to escape, especially when they received advanced warning of the “Aktion.” In addition, some Jews were sent long distances from ghettos in the Rivne and Volyn regions to work in camps in Kyiv and Vinnytsia. A few remnant ghettos, such as that in Volodymyr-Volynsky, existed into 1943. Few traces of these camps remain today, even in those places where the Jewish gravesites have been marked by memorial stones.

What is the significance of these camps for our understanding of the Holocaust in Rk Ukraine? The number of Jews in each of these camps ranged from around a dozen to 1000 or more, such that the total number held in all 120 camps probably exceeded 15,000 people. For 1943, Alexander Kruglov estimates about 6500 Jews were still alive in remnant ghettos or camps within Rk Ukraine (Kruglov 2008, 282–283). While these numbers remain small in comparison with a total number of Jews killed in these regions that exceeded 600,000, it demonstrates that a form of “destruction through labor” was put in place in most regions of Rk Ukraine. The removal of some able-bodied Jews from ghettos for labor in agriculture, road construction, and on other tasks, reduced the possibilities for resistance and met some German wartime economic needs. In general, most labor camps were liquidated in conjunction with the “second wave” of killings in 1942, or shortly thereafter, as specified by Reichskommissar Koch. Yet the diversity of agencies involved in the exploitation of Jewish labor, including German civilian authorities, SS units, and the Organisation Todt, meant that some camps survived into 1943, when a small “third wave” swept away most remaining Jewish laborers. Yet the complex relationship with the Romanian authorities in Transnistria, from where some Jewish laborers were obtained, meant that some Jews were returned to still existing camps in Transnistria, while a few Jews from the DG IV camps that escaped subsequently sought refuge in Transnistria, where systematic killings by the Romanian authorities had by then been halted.

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