Ukrainian Repair and the Legacy of Forced Labour in Saarland

Fiona Greenland

The ironworks in Völklingen present a rare example of a cultural landmark that is at once historically significant, visually spectacular, and yet easy to miss in the broader cultural landscape. It is as though the Colosseum of Rome were known to only a handful of people who happened to visit that part of Italy. Cultural heritage landmarks like these come with entangled histories of power and labour. Those histories can surface at moments we least expect.

The Völklingen Ironworks was established in 1873 and propelled the region's growth for much of the twentieth century. Workers flocked there from rural areas in search of good jobs and a better life. The ironworks ceased operations in 1986, and in 1994, UNESCO listed it as a World Heritage Site, describing it as "a unique monument to the technological history and industrial culture of the 19th and early 20th century".[1] I first visited Völklinger Hütte[2] for the *True Size of Africa* exhibition in November 2024, which was curated with the support of the KHK team. The opening event incorporated African and African diasporic music, art, and literature to "retrace and uncover traditions of thought, biases, and stereotypes"[3] propagated by European colonialism. This included the ironworks' participation in resource extraction from Africa and the exploitation of African labour. During that first visit, it was clear to me that I needed to return to view the full site. It was during my second visit that I came across information about another group of the ironworks' victims: children, women, and men forced to work there during the Second World War. As the site's excellent pedagogical materials put it:

A total of 11,974 men, women and children were registered as forced labourers at the Völklingen Ironworks and its auxiliary plants. Among them were French, Italian and Russian prisoners of war, and Russian and Ukrainian civilians who had been deported from the then Soviet Union.[4]

Hermann Röchling, the ironworks' owner, joined the National Socialist party in 1935 and lobbied Nazi officials – first for business contracts and, in time, for human beings. The site's audio guide narrates his entrepreneurial rise and fall: as the innovator of the *Ostarbeiter* transports, he was found guilty of crimes against humanity in 1949 and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment. He was released early, after 18 months of "honorary detention" in Freiburg.

The legacy of Röchling is meaningless if we limit ourselves to abstraction. What captured my attention in the Völklinger Hütte display was the list of names in the *Ostarbeiter* transport lists. Hundreds of Ukrainians. Hundreds of young people: children, teenagers, twenty-somethings categorized as "single".[5] They were just starting their lives. Many came from western Ukraine, some 1,500 kilometres from Saarland. How had they come to be here? Did they volunteer, in hope of a well-paid job or the chance to escape the Bloodlands? Were they coerced at gunpoint? Did they ever see home again?

Thanks to the fieldwork I have conducted in Ukraine, supported in part by CURE's fellow programme, I have been able to begin answering these questions. On a recent day in Kyiv, I met Larissa Babij, a Ukrainian-American author, translator, and dancer. She was born into a family of

post-World War II immigrants from Halychyna, in western Ukraine. In her twenties, she chose to make Kyiv her home. Following Russia's full-scale invasion, she refused entreaties to evacuate and became an active participant in Ukraine's defence. These experiences are chronicled in her 2024 book, *A Kind of Refugee*.[6] She gifted me a copy. I read it in two days. It was then that the ironworks locked into focus.

> 1943 was the year that the Nazis, occupying my other grandmother's village in western Ukraine, decided one day to gather all the teenagers from school and send them to work as slave laborers in Germany. These events would lead them [Babij's grandparents] to eventually settle in the United States, where my parents would meet … and where I would later be born.[7]

German authorities sent Babij's grandmother Maria to work on a farm in western Germany. There was no warning, no choice. After her release, she made her way to a DP (Displaced Persons) camp, and eventually to the United States. Babij's grandmother was among the more fortunate. The Forced Labor Archiveof the Free University of Berlin has collected nearly 600 interviews with survivors of Nazi forced labour, representing voices from 26 different countries.[8] Torture, starvation, and death are recurrent themes. At the Völklingen Ironworks alone, "261 foreign workers, mostly forced labourers, died, among them 60 children and infants".[9]

The Forced Labor Archive notes that some 20 million people from across Europe were forced to work for Nazi enterprises. Reparations were slow to arrive. In 2000, the Claims Conference, through its Program for Former Slave and Forced Laborers, established a DM 10 billion fund to compensate surviving labourers. Money is one form that reparations can take. But the testimonies of the labourers' descendants reveal that no sum can right every wrong. Deportation broke up families and depopulated villages. Rural folkways were lost. Ancestral ties severed. Babij writes,

> Ukrainians have been damaged for generations. You will not find a family without personal stories of violent arrest, deportation, unnatural death, or forced resettlement. […] I can attest that being uprooted from your homeland under the duress of war, refashioning yourself in a new land amongst new people in a new culture and language, leaves scars that last for generations.[10]

Generations! In 2020, to mark the reissue of Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*,[11] I published a paper on enslavable bodies in the medieval Venetian slave market.[12] Large numbers of Slavic girls and women were taken by force from the Balkans for domestic work in the Republic of Venice. In that study, I examined the social factors that undergirded this trade. Slavic people, I found, were regarded by Venetians as enslavable because of their ethnicity. This elision is reflected in the etymology of the word *slave:* Slav. I wonder whether the German soldiers who rounded up Maria and other Ukrainian teenagers were assuaged by this entrenched conflation of ethnic category and victimhood. Whether they told themselves, *These people are fit to labour for us because that is how it has always been.* Under successive homicidal regimes, Ukrainians were subjected to death, displacement, and dispossession – and yet, against all odds, some endured. They survived. They rebuilt lives. They regenerated culture.

We know the Nazis regarded Ukrainians as expendable. In the Nazi Hunger Plan, according to Timothy Snyder, "[i]nhabitants of Ukrainian cities, and almost everyone in Belarus and in northwestern Russia, would have to starve or flee. The cities would be destroyed, the terrain would be returned to natural forest, and about thirty million people would starve to death in the winter of 1941–1942."[13] These were the matter-of-fact projections of German state officials, who had learned from Stalin's forced starvation of more than 3.9 million Ukrainians.[14] Despite the policies of successive homicidal regimes, surviving Ukrainians rebuilt their lives and culture.

Today, the land of stories and songs that Babij learned about from her grandparents endures a

brutal military assault by the Russian Federation Armed Forces. Babij is an active participant in the defence of Ukraine. She fundraises for equipment and rehabilitation. She is also an active cultural practitioner, assembling people and ideas whose contributions to Ukrainian culture and society, as she writes, "will endure long after its military victory".[15] She refuses the Russian narrative of Ukraine as the derivative "Little Brother" by bringing Ukrainians' unique voices and stories into international discourse through translation, writing, and publishing.

KHK Programme Director Julien Jeusette argues, in an essay published on this blog, that cultivating a reparative future "requires changing the stories we tell".[16] Deliberative story frameworks and narratives, he writes, hold the potential to promote "solidarity, care, and reparation". I made my fifth visit to Völklingen in May. Each time, I see something different. With Babij's multi-generational, transnational story, I come full circle with the place and what it teaches us about labour, loss, and the capacity for humane and humanistic repair.

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Cover image: Christian Boltanski, "Die Zwangsarbeiter – Erinnerungsort in der Völklinger Hütte" © Hans-Georg Merkel / Weltkulturerbe Völklinger Hütte.

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1. ICOMOS nominating form for the World Heritage List, 15 September 1983. The full document is available through the UNESCO website (accessed 29 June 2025), https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/687/documents/.
2. Völklingen Ironworks is the name of the pig-iron production factory. Völklinger Hütte has come to signify the UNESCO site. The names of sites on the World Heritage List sometimes depart from the local toponym because the inscription maps – the entire space marked for preservation – do not perfectly align with the "site".
3. "The True Size of Africa," Völklinger Hütte (accessed 9 July 2025), https://voelklinger-huette.org/en/exhibitions/the-true-size-of-africa/
4. "Zwangsarbeit: Der Zweite Weltkrieg,"Völklinger Hütte (accessed 28 June 2025), https://voelklinger-huette.org/en/weltkulturerbe/zwangsarbeit/.
5. For the comprehensive list see (accessed 28 June 2025), https://voelklinger-huette.org/assets/Historische-Dokumente/Text_PDF_Dateien/Zwangsarbeiterliste_01.pdf.
6. Larissa Babij, *A Kind of Refugee: The Story of an American Who Refused to Leave Ukraine* (*ibidem*-Verlag, 2024).
7. Babij, *A Kind of Refugee*, 198.
8. Forced Labor 1939-1945 (accessed 29. June 2025), https://www.fu-berlin.de/en/featured-stories/research/2022/forced-labor-archive-cedis/index.html
9. https://voelklinger-huette.org/en/weltkulturerbe/zwangsarbeit/.
10. Babij, *A Kind of Refugee*, 184.
11. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Harvard University Press, 2018 [1981]).
12. Fiona R. Greenland, "Long-Range Continuities in Comparative and Historical Sociology: The Case of Parasitism and Women's Enslavement," *Theory and Society* 48, no. 6, (2020). Translated and reprinted as: "Kontinuitäten über lange Zeiträume in der historisch-vergleichenden Soziologie: Über den Parasitismus und die Versklavung von Frauen," in *Sklaverei, Freiheit und Arbeit*, ed.

T. Wobbe, M. Braig, and L. Renard (De Gruyter, 2024).
13. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, 2010), 163.
14. Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine* (Penguin Random House, 2017).
15. Babij, *A Kind of Refugee*, 135.
16. Julien Jeusette, "What Stories, Which Future?," *The Reparation Blog,* 20 March 2025, https://cure.uni-saarland.de/en/media-library/blog/what-stories-which-future/.

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