

Into the Darkness: An Uncensored Report from Inside the Third Reich at War

by Lothrop Stoddard



1940

Chapter 11: The Army of the Spade

One cold winter morning I approached an extensive building on the outskirts of Berlin. Near the entrance I observed a large banner stretched upon the wall. It was red with a central circle of white, within which was a symbolic black spade from whose short handle sprouted twin wheat-ears. Below the banner was inscribed this saying by Frederick the Great:

“Whoever makes two stalks of grain to grow where formerly there was only one, can claim to have done more for his nation than a military genius who has won a great battle.”

That was my introduction to a study of the National Labor Service — what Germans call *Arbeitsdienst*. It is an outstanding feature of the

Third Reich, variously interpreted by foreign observers. You hear good words for it, especially as it is applied to young men. But its extension to Germany's young womanhood is by no means so favorably regarded.

The Nazis did not invent the idea. It grew up spontaneously during the Weimar Republic, when various organizations established camps for unemployed youths to take them off the streets and put them to useful work, especially in the country on land-reclamation and forest projects. When the full tide of economic depression hit Germany, the Weimar regime tried to co-ordinate these groups into an officially controlled organization. Membership, however, was voluntary. The aim was a temporary one, to cope with an economic emergency. In both spirit and method, this first Labor Service closely resembled the C.C.C. organization set up under our "*New Deal*." However, it was not so unified or efficiently run as ours.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they took over this rather dubious experiment and soon transformed it along characteristic lines. In fact, they were already operating a small labor service corps of their own, commanded by Colonel Konstantin Hierl, who was destined to develop the movement to its present scope. This soldierly-looking man, with close-clipped mustache and precise mouth, seems to be one of those efficient organizers whom National Socialism has produced.



Colonel Konstantin Hierl

In describing the National Labor Service, two things should be kept in mind. First, what we have already stressed with other Nazi innovations — the wide distinction between theory and practice. The picture which Nazi spokesmen paint for you may be very far indeed from what is actually in operation. Sometimes they admit this; but they then point out that their regime is only seven years old and has functioned during a period of growing stress and strain culminating in a great foreign war. Under such exceptional circumstances they claim that the fair-minded foreign investigator should keep this in mind, and should neither condemn the idea itself nor deny its feasibility in more favorable times. A second point to be remembered is the unfavorable trend in the working of Nazi institutions which set in with their ruthless concentration on the Four Year Plan for national self-sufficiency under the imminent threat of war, and which has been further accentuated since the outbreak of war itself. This is notably true of the National Labor Service. In the early years of the Nazi regime, it resembled the ideal far more closely than it has done in recent years or than it does today.

With these qualifications, let's take a look at the theoretical set-up, as it is described to you at Labor Service Headquarters and set forth in its abundant propagandist literature.

The plan for this National Labor Service combines severely practical aims with high ideals. Become compulsory and universal, it took the entire annual "*class*" of twenty-year-old youths and set them to productive tasks designed to conserve and expand Germany's natural resources, especially her food supply.

The idealistic side of the story is thus expressed by Colonel Hierl:

"The Labor Service restores the soul-contact between work and the worker, destroyed by a materialistic philosophy."

The ideal is emphasized in the Service motto: *Arbeit Edelt* — "*Work Ennobles.*" Members of the Service are termed "*Soldiers of Labor.*" Collectively, it is known as **The Army of the Spade**. This army numbers approximately 400,000, normally housed in about 2,000 camps scattered throughout Germany.

The Labor Service is designed to accomplish "*national tasks*" useful to the German people as a whole.

By this is meant such matters as drainage projects, reclamation of waste or marginal lands, reforestation, and similar works which otherwise would be done neither by private nor public enterprise because normal wages and working conditions would make it too expensive. The Labor Army is not intended to compete with ordinary labor.



RAD squad, 1940

*(Reichsarbeitsdienst (translated to [Reich](#) Labour Service, abbreviated **RAD**)*

These young labor soldiers are not supposed to be “sweated” in their tasks, since that would tend to make them hate the very labor which they are taught to honor. The idea is not to overstrain them. Neither are speed and material efficiency deemed primary considerations. When I was shown the tools used by the Labor Service, it was carefully explained to me that all of them must be such as are merely helpful adjuncts to manual labor. Spades, axes, mattocks, and many other implements were there, some specially invented as the result of practical experience. But they were all tools, subordinate to the laborer himself. The Labor Service does not officially favor the use of mechanism like tractors, where man is a mere guider of the machine. The psychology aspect of work done by the Labor Service is thereby emphasized.

There is certainly enough to be done. Labor Service surveys estimate that there is work of this sort for 500,000 men for twenty years. At

Berlin headquarters all this is graphically set forth on an immense wall-map, where at a glance you can see both what is planned and what has already been done. The war has interrupted many if not most pending projects, but much has been completed, particularly important drainage works along the Baltic and North Sea coasts, together with moorland reclamations in various regions.

According to official statements, Labor Service detachments rarely exceed two hundred men. In peacetime, they are usually housed in wooden barracks much like our C.C.C. camps. The dormitories are furnished with mattress beds, and each man has his individual locker, chair, and small table. The camp-unit centers in a larger barrack containing a big combined dining and social room, together with kitchen, larder, and officers' quarters.

The normal, peacetime working day is spent as follows: Reveille in summer at 5.00 A.M.; in winter at 6.00 A.M. Ten minutes of setting-up exercises follow. Then an hour for washing, dressing, bed-making, clean-up, and early breakfast. Then flag parade and orders for the day.

The day's work takes up seven hours, including time taken for marching to and from work, and thirty minutes for breakfast. Dinner in summer is served at 1.30 P.M.; in winter at 2.30. An hour's rest is normally taken after dinner. The afternoons are devoted to bodily and mental training. Sports, games, and marching exercises take place on alternate days and last one hour. After that, daily instruction is given in home politics, German history, current affairs, and subjects of special interest to the Labor Service. Needless to say, all lessons are intensely propagandist and serve to implant the Nazi point of view.

Supper is served at 7.00 P.M. After that, the evening hours of leisure begin, spent according to individual inclination except twice weekly, when all join in community singing, attendance at lectures, or seeing motion pictures — further bits of propaganda. Camp tattoo and lights-out end the day at 10.00 P.M.

Such is the official program of the labor school through which more than 2,000,000 young men have passed in the last seven years. Of course it is designed primarily to make loyal Nazis, and it has undoubtedly played a large part in molding the thought and outlook of the younger generation. Nevertheless, from what I could gather, the Labor Service has been popular with both the men themselves and the general population. I was told by Germans and foreigners alike that, in parades or Party demonstrations, the Labor Battalions, in their warm earth-brown uniforms and with their gleaming spades, were always greeted by loud applause.

What I have been describing is the peacetime scene. Today, one rarely sees those brown-uniformed youths, either at work or on parade. An omnivorous war-machine has caught up these disciplined labor forces and has drafted them for military tasks. Most of them are now concentrated either behind the West-Wall or in Poland. I was told that, in the Polish campaign, the Labor Battalions were invaluable. Going in right behind the troops, they did yeoman service in clean-up operations. Naturally, under stress of war, the normal peacetime schedule of work and life I depicted has given place to a sterner and more strenuous regimen. To all intents and purposes, those boys are "*in the army now.*" I heard few criticisms of the Labor Service for young men even in quarters strongly anti-Nazi in most respects. However, I encountered much criticism of the young women's branch of the service, in some instances rising to severe condemnation. In Nazi eyes, since a national labor service should be truly universal, Germany's young womanhood is logically included in the general scheme. In practice, however, labor service for women was not generalized until the outbreak of the present war. At first, service was voluntary, and the number enrolled annually did not average much over 15,000.

The basic idea behind the *Women's Labor Service* is the same as that for their brothers. Girls of all social classes live and work together,

learning the value and dignity of labor — and of course becoming ardent Nazis in the process. Their surroundings and the types of work they do, however, differ markedly from those of their brothers in the *Army of the Spade*.

Though these girls wear a brown uniform, it is of feminine cut, quite like that of our Girl Scouts. Beyond flag drill, there are few military features, the goal being to turn out housewives and mothers; not potential female soldiers. The camps are relatively small, averaging thirty-five girls. They also tend to be less barrack-like in aspect, and camp life is concerned largely with domestic training in all its branches.

Outside of their camp curriculum, Labor Service girls have various duties. Some of these are in the line of social service. Many girls are assigned to help overworked mothers by tending their children. To this end, some camps are established near industrial areas to aid the wives of factory workers. Such camps sometimes run kindergartens. Country children are similarly looked after by Service girls, especially in harvest time when the peasant mothers must be away in the fields.

However, Labor Service girls have been increasingly assigned directly and almost exclusively to regular farm work. Every morning they leave camp for farmsteads in the neighborhood, doing whatever the peasant or his wife may direct and returning to camp only toward nightfall. All that time they are entirely without supervision by their camp guardians and are in a rough, hard environment, associating with peasants who are apt to be coarse and uncouth, and who frequently may be drunken and immoral. I was told of distressing instances where girls had been overworked, ill-treated, insulted, and even seduced, so that they returned to their homes with child. Those are the dark aspects which seem to be inevitable in a system like this.

Yet it is precisely this phase of the *Women's Labor Service* which the war has greatly accentuated. Since the outbreak of war, national

service for young women is being so rapidly extended that it may soon become well-nigh universal in fact as well as in name. Shortly after hostilities broke out, 60,000 girls were mustered for the Labor Corps, in addition to 40,000 already in service. New barracks were hastily built to accommodate these recruits, and I understand that girl conscription has proceeded as fast as they could be effectively mobilized. Most of them were frankly destined for farm work as replacements for peasants called to the colors.

All this is merely part of the general process which has turned the Third Reich into a vast Modern Sparta, wherein every able-bodied man or woman, youth or maiden, is part of a gigantic war-machine. We have already noted the decree giving the Government authority to send anyone anywhere on any sort of duty.

The implications of this decree are limitless. I recall a chat I had with a man in Bremen on this very point. I asked whether the virtual paralysis of that great port-city by the British blockade would not result in widespread unemployment and a difficult local situation. The man looked at me in genuine surprise.

“Of course not,” he answered. *“If, say, half the people here have no local work to do, they’ll just be shifted elsewhere to other jobs. You understand,”* he concluded, *“we Germans are all soldiers today, no matter whether we are in or out of uniform.”*

That is the spirit you encounter everywhere in this New Sparta.

Version History

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