Abstract:

Victims of Two Dictatorships: Ukrainian *Ostarbeiters* and Soviet Prisoners of War under Nazi Occupation and postwar Soviet Rule

The deportation of more than two million people from Ukraine as so called *Ostarbeiters* to perform forced labour in the German Reich was one of the most consequential experiences of German occupation for Ukrainian society. Ukraine was the principal recruitment ground for Soviet forced labourers deported to the Reich, more than half of whom were women and girls. Yet the significance of this mass deportation for Ukraine's wartime and post-war history remains insufficiently explored.

At the same time, occupied Ukraine was a major site of the mass death of Soviet prisoners of war in German custody. In many regions, particularly in eastern Ukraine, POWs constituted one of the largest groups of victims of German occupation. Hundreds of thousands died from starvation, disease, exposure, forced labour, and deliberate killing. Despite the scale of these crimes, the history of individual POW camps and the deployment of prisoners as forced labourers within occupied Ukraine remain remarkably understudied.

The lecture brings these two histories together, examining the deportation and exploitation of *Ostarbeiters* and Soviet POWs as interconnected elements of German occupation, labour policy, and mass violence. It asks how the escalating demand for labour interacted with Nazi racial hierarchies and how gender, military status, and perceived "labour capacity" shaped individual experiences and chances of survival.

Liberation, however, did not necessarily mark the end of coercion. Following repatriation to the Soviet Union, former *Ostarbeiters* and POWs were subjected to NKVD filtration and suspicion of political unreliability or collaboration. Many faced discrimination and restrictions or were once again mobilised for hard labour, this time in the reconstruction of the Soviet economy. Female *Ostarbeiters* were exposed to sexual violence under both regimes: first at the hands of German occupiers and employers, and later, during liberation and repatriation, by members of the Red Army and Soviet repatriation personnel. In this sense, their trajectories illuminate what it meant to become victims of two dictatorships.

Finally, the lecture traces the longer afterlives of forced labour and captivity. The experiences of *Ostarbeiters* and POWs remained marginalised in Soviet public memory and burdened by social stigma for decades. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union did they receive broader public recognition. The German compensation programmes of the late 1990s and early 2000s provided not only material compensation but also belated symbolic recognition, while generating an extraordinary body of testimonies and biographical records. The lecture concludes by asking

how forced labour, captivity, and repatriation have been remembered, silenced, and reinterpreted in Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine and Germany, and how compensation and changing cultures of remembrance have reshaped the place of these victims in the history of the Second World War.

Interesting aspects for comparison could include:

1. Deportation and camp experiences in the Soviet Union: *Ostarbeiters* and Soviet prisoners of war after their repatriation; forcibly resettled families from Moldova; and Japanese prisoners of war in Soviet captivity.
2. the repatriation experiences of Soviet POWs returning from Germany to the Soviet Union and of Japanese POWs returning from Soviet captivity to Japan
3. Compensation: German compensation for former Nazi forced labourers and Soviet prisoners of war, as well as post-war compensation for Japanese prisoners of war who had been held in Siberia.
4. (Possibly also artistic representations of camp experiences? I could contribute additional examples of artworks by former Soviet camp inmates.)

Prof. Dr. Tanja Penter
https://www.hist.uni-heidelberg.de/de/seminar-bibliothek/struktur/professuren/osteuropaeische-geschichte