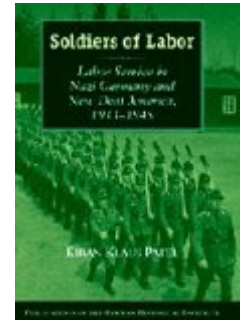


Kiran Patel. *Soldiers of Labor: Labor Service in Nazi Germany and New Deal America, 1933-1945.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xii + 446 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-83416-2.



Reviewed by Thilo W. Schimmel

Published on H-German (July, 2006)

In the wake of the global economic catastrophe of the late 1920s and early 1930s, more than twelve nations utilized the institution of the labor service to mitigate the deleterious effects of this existential crisis of modernization. In combating the economic crisis and its corresponding trauma, these countries rejected a sole reliance on market-based solutions. Instead, they initiated state-sponsored work projects organized through militarized camp systems to overcome both the economic turmoil and its inherent threat to the viability of capitalist democracies. In *Soldiers of Labor*, Patel compares the labor services of those two countries most strongly impacted by the Great Depression—Nazi Germany's Reichsarbeitsdienst (RAD) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the United States—to understand how each nation responded to the crisis. How competent and effective was the dictatorial Third Reich in overcoming the depression, compared to the democratic U.S.?

As a result of the uneven state of the existing historiography on both labor services—the CCC has been thoroughly researched, but there is no

equivalent study of the RAD considering its educational, organizational and labor policies after 1933—Patel opted for an intentionally unbalanced approach to his subject. In this study, the center of investigation lies on the RAD with the American CCC serving as a "contrasting foil." The actual comparison between both services is then carried out at the level of functional equivalents. Because both labor services are situated at the intersection of economic and social policy-making, the examination incorporates not only the respective contribution both institutions made to overcome the depression, but also examines notions of masculinity, social identity and visions of society included in the services' educational programs. In addition, Patel analyzes the reciprocal perception of each service in the other country, as well as intercultural transfer between them. Patel argues that neither service succeeded in combating the depression in a significant way. Their main contribution was symbolic. Moreover, the author points to a limited degree of convergence between the two institutions, despite all their differences.

Following a concise overview of the transformation of Weimar's *Freiwilliger Arbeitsdienst* (FAD) through National Socialist coordination (throughout the study, the FAD offers a minor, third level of comparison), Patel compares and contrasts the organizational structure and internal efficiency of the RAD and the CCC. The author points to similarities in the organizational structure of the services in both countries, despite their divergent political systems. These similarities stemmed from the military oversight common to both. This form of mobilization, in turn, accounts for a further parallel between the two labor services: both acquired a high degree of supervisory access over enrollees in the camps. Ultimately, however, the differences were paramount. In the U.S., the military constituted only one source of influence on the CCC. Recruitment, for instance, was the prerogative of the Labor Department. In addition, the military model in the U.S. was somewhat coincidental, resulting from the fact that mobilization was the military's responsibility. In Nazi Germany, by contrast, the military focus originated from the worldview of its top-level leaders. Moreover, while the military component in Germany was the result of the consolidation of a dictatorship, in the U.S., it represented the signs of a traumatized democracy.

In terms of their internal efficiency, the histories of both services diverged similarly. The Nazis created a new organization from the ground up. Moreover, the hierarchical chain of command in the RAD left little room for lower level employees to maneuver, making it staff-intensive, expensive and ultimately inefficient. Most importantly, when full-fledged re-armament in 1937 led to the end of the economic crisis in Germany, the National Socialist regime, rather than abolishing the labor service, converted it into construction units for the army that became entangled in the implementation of racial policies on both fronts. The decentralized CCC, in contrast, had significantly fewer resources at its disposal, used a smaller administration, left more competencies to area comman-

ders and was abolished in 1942, when war preparations terminated its economic usefulness. It was, therefore, overall a comparatively efficient institution. The intricacies of the institutional history of the German labor service that Patel recounts here could have been condensed—at least for the English translation. It is in this respect that the book bears the mark of its origins as a dissertation.

In terms of the educational mission of both labor services, Patel demonstrates the greatest dissimilarities between the two services as well as evidence of intercultural exchange. Both services employed a kind of camp system that approximated what the author terms a "total camp" (p. 200). They allowed for the ordering of time and space as well as controlling and disciplining enrollees. Whereas in Nazi Germany, the site corresponded fully to the educational goals of disciplining and toughening the enrollees, in the U.S., camp discipline resulted from practical necessity. It was also often counteracted locally; furthermore, it was largely transitory in nature, as service men re-entered their private lives afterwards. Most pronounced, however, were differences in regards to the objectives of the camps' educational missions. In Nazi Germany, the focus was on enacting the national community among enrollees, who were chosen according to criteria relating to their supposed racial value. Radical antisemitism was therefore omnipresent in instruction.

Ultimately, however, the labor service fell short of its ambitious objectives in political indoctrination. It did succeed, however, in steeling men's bodies as part of the preparation for a future war. In addition, Patel states, the labor service managed to instill a National Socialist sense of masculinity and collective identity. It would have been interesting to correlate the notions of masculinity propagated in the camps to pre-existing notions of masculinity among the enrollees. These preconceptions differed widely between members of the middle and working classes. Such

an approach would have enabled the author to specify in more detail which components of applied National Socialism functioned to integrate the diverse group of enrollees. In contrast, while the CCC also sought to create a disciplined personality and aimed to convey a community focus, preparations for a future war and racism (though implicit in the access criteria for the camps) played a comparatively negligible role. Most striking is the author's discovery of intercultural transfer in the sphere of education. The U.S. proved surprisingly receptive, in some instances, to educational ideas from Nazi Germany, as in the case of the modified training of air mechanics, which took its direct model from Hitler Youth flyers.

Patel found the greatest similarities between both labor services in the area of the actual labor performed and the planning of projects during the span of their common existence. Both the CCC and the RAD worked on similar projects, such as soil improvement and amelioration of the infrastructure, though for widely varying reasons. Both sides initially refrained from military projects. The Nazi regime did so as a result of international observation; in the U.S., distance from such activities was part of the foundational spirit behind the service and was reinforced by attempts to distinguish the CCC from its Nazi equivalent. Upon U.S. entry into World War II, weapons training and military projects became part of the CCC's mission until its dissolution in 1942. In a similar vein, following the National Socialist regime's attack on Europe, the German labor service was transformed into construction units of the army. By 1942, however, in sharp contrast to the U.S., labor services troops had increasingly been assimilated to ordinary army units and directly participated in the Holocaust and war crimes on the Eastern Front, though Patel was unable to substantiate the full scope of their involvement. Thus, future research will need to examine whether the camp experience had a direct impact

on its members' willingness to participate in the Nazi genocide.

The similarity of work activities pursued by both labor services and the parallel organization of work account for their common failure to evolve into effective means for combating the Depression. The labor-intensive nature of their projects, the lack of machinery, as well as the low level of productivity in comparison to the private sector prevented labor services from fulfilling their intended function of rejuvenating the economy. Only economic stimulation through rearmament ultimately enabled both Nazi Germany and the U.S. to overcome the Great Depression; in the case of Germany, this development was the result of a choice for a war of aggression, while America was forced to take that route. The major contribution of both labor services thus lay in their symbolic function, as they succeeded in conveying the impression that the period of state inactivity had ended and a concerted effort was undertaken to combat the crisis. Indeed, rather than asking whether labor services constituted a meaningful instrument to combat the depression, asking how, and to what degree, labor services succeeded in integrating their members into the existing social order could have functioned as an equally fruitful conceptualization for framing the entire study.

Patel's meticulous study of the Reichsarbeitsdienst and its counterpart in the U.S. deserves a wide readership. It is based on extensive primary source research in more than ten archives on both sides of the Atlantic. Not only its breadth, but also the close reading of the RAD's sparse remnants make this an impressive study; indeed, it is the first comprehensive study of this institution. This achievement alone is important. Moreover, the author draws on a wide variety of methodologies, ranging from conceptualizations of masculinity and space to transnational history; this diversity of strategy increases this monograph's overall innovativeness. The author's greatest achievement rests in having uncovered some

striking, unexpected similarities between both institutions, and in revealing their reciprocal impact. Some of their differences--based on divergent political cultures and their overall ineffectiveness in combating the depression--are perhaps less surprising. Moreover, because the author comes to the conclusion that the distance among social classes was reduced in Nazi camps, his analysis could have benefited from a general, more class-inclusive focus. One of the major distinguishing features between RAD and CCC enrollees was, after all, that the compulsory nature of the service in Nazi Germany meant that all classes were present, while in the U.S., lower-class membership, presumably, was overrepresented. Overall, this study in itself, and its speedy (and excellent) translation into English and publication by the German Historical Institute, is a present-day representation of one of the phenomena Patel examined: transfer in a global world.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Thilo W. Schimmel. Review of Patel, Kiran. *Soldiers of Labor: Labor Service in Nazi Germany and New Deal America, 1933-1945*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11996>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.