

PHD RESEARCH

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Belgian Labour in Nazi Germany : A Social History

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The Nazis' deployment of civilian workers from across Europe in Germany's war economy established one of the largest forced labour programs since the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century. Between 350,000 and 400,000 Belgians worked in Germany during World War II—around half of whom went to Germany voluntarily, but under a degree of pressure due to German economic policy in occupied Belgium.

A social history with a focus on the history of everyday life, the thesis analyses the implementation of the foreign labour program through quantitative and qualitative research. A range of original sources, including the records of the Military Administration in Belgium, labour records, residence and transport lists, as well as letters, diaries, photographs and personal accounts, are used.

Dividing Belgium's population along linguistic lines, the Nazis subjected Belgians to differentiated treatment based on whether they were Flemings or Walloons. The thesis maps Belgians' varied experiences, illustrating convergence and divergence from Nazi racial policy and the key role ordinary Germans played. The thesis shows that Belgian workers were not just passive victims of the German occupation. The decision to accept work in Germany was a personal one for many Belgian volunteers, based on individual circumstances. The thesis illustrates that in Rhine-Ruhr cities close to the German-Belgian border like Düsseldorf, volunteers made up

a high proportion of Belgian workers. Their employment patterns often mirrored those of Belgian migrant workers who went to Germany during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Volunteers often completed labour assignments and returned home during winter, while others took up a series of labour assignments in Germany during the war. In hard economic times and with no end to the war in sight, Belgians tried to navigate the best course for themselves and their families. While conscripts were by definition not free, as western Europeans, Belgians enjoyed greater rights and legal protections and were able to exercise a significant degree of control over their own destinies. The analysis of Belgian women's departures also reveals a complex picture. In spite of the economic constraints and conscription, Belgian women often went to Germany for their own reasons. Belgian women were not simply victims of Nazi labour policies and working in Germany even proved a liberating and positive experience for some. A distinction must be made vis-à-vis the material advantages western Europeans enjoyed due to their elevated position in the Nazi racial hierarchy and the benefits individuals secured by virtue of their employment and linguistic skills and greater confidence.