



DOCTORAATSONDERZOEK - DOCTORATS

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Belgian Labour in Nazi-Germany : A Social History

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The Nazis' deployment of foreigners (*Ausländereinsatz*) between 1939 and 1945 established one of the largest forced labour programs since the abolition of slavery during the nineteenth century. Foreign civilians from across Europe were deployed in Germany's war economy. Between 350,000 and 400,000 Belgian civilians were deployed in Germany during the Second World War – roughly half of these workers went to Germany voluntarily, but under a degree of pressure due to the Military Administration's economic policies in occupied Belgium. The majority of Belgians were deployed in large industrial centres in Germany, working in the war industries.

The thesis examines the implementation of the Nazi forced labour program through the analysis of the lives of Belgians who worked in Germany during the period 1940-1945 and makes use of a variety of original sources, including the records of the German Military Administration in Belgium and German and Belgian labour officials, as well as the accounts of those who lived and worked in Germany. Conceived as a social history of the Nazi foreign labour program with a strong focus on the history of everyday life, the thesis draws extensively on records such as letters, diaries, photographs and personal accounts of Belgians who worked in Germany during the Second World War, as well as hospital, police and judicial records. While earlier studies have focused on Nazi labour policy in occupied Belgium, this thesis extends existing research through the examination of the employment

patterns and experiences of Belgians deployed in the German industrialised cities of Berlin and Düsseldorf during the Second World War.

Belgian Liaison Officers, reporting to the Ministry for Reconstruction, worked in Germany for many years after the conclusion of hostilities in May 1945, gathering records of Belgians living in Germany during the war from city administrations, hospitals, employers, the police and judicial authorities from all corners of Germany for use in applications for recognition as victims of the war under the various statutes established by the Belgian state after the war and pensions claims by Belgians who worked in Germany. These vast holdings, now overseen by the *Direction générale "Victimes de la Guerre"*, are used to approach the topic both from a macro-historical and micro-historical perspective. Statistical analysis of residence records from Berlin and Düsseldorf provides a picture of the demographic profile of the Belgians deployed in Germany, while transport lists and individual's *Service Documentation et Recherches* (SDR) files have been used to develop a picture of their patterns of employments. Hospital, *Gestapo* and judicial records have been utilised to gain a greater understanding of Belgian workers' treatment in Germany and their dealings with the authorities in Germany.

The Nazi regime divided Belgium's population along linguistic lines : Belgians were officially subject to differentiated treatment based on whether they were Flemings or Walloons. Examining the treatment of Belgians by the Nazi regime and comparing Nazi racial policies and practice, the thesis emphasises the key role played by local authorities, employers and individual Germans in shaping





the experiences of foreign workers. It is argued that an important distinction must be made in relation to the material advantages western European workers enjoyed due to their elevated position in the Nazi racial hierarchy and the benefits individual foreign workers were able to secure by virtue of their employment skills, linguistic skills and greater confidence. The experiences of Belgian workers are also compared and contrasted with those of other national groups and are related to the broader history of foreign labour in Nazi Germany.

The study also examines the experiences of Belgian women. While Belgian women represented close to 15 percent of Belgians deployed in Germany, studies of Belgian labour in Germany have devoted little attention to their experiences. Few Belgian women sought formal recognition from the Belgian state as victims of the war under the various statutes. Drawing on Belgian women's SDR files, the thesis contributes to an understanding of their experiences. The analysis of women's departures reveals a complex picture. In spite of the economic constraints and conscription for *Arbeitseinsatz* that compelled many women to depart for Germany, the experiences of Belgian women show that they still had some room to manoeuvre and many women made the choice to go to Germany for their own reasons. Belgian women enjoyed a privileged status as western European workers, which brought greater confidence. The public outrage in Belgium that surrounded the conscription of Belgian women ensured that the German labour administration and employers were forced to make concessions to Belgian women – concessions that they readily exploited. Women who were conscripted worked pro-actively to secure their return

to Belgium, a number using pregnancy – feigned or real – as an avenue to obtain leave to return home. Whatever the circumstances of their departure, Belgian women were not simply at the mercy of the German employers and labour authorities. Their departure for Germany even proved a liberating and positive experience for some women. Belgian women were not simply victims of the occupier's labour policies.

By focusing on the social history of the *Ausländereinsatz* and the stories of individual Belgians, the thesis maps the varied experiences of Belgians in Germany during the Second World War, illustrating convergence and divergence from Nazi racial policy and the fundamental role ordinary Germans played. More importantly, however, the thesis shows that Belgian civilian workers were not just passive victims of the German occupation. The decision to go to Germany to work was a personal one for many Belgian volunteers, based on individual circumstances. The thesis illustrates that the employment patterns of Belgian volunteers frequently mirrored those of Belgian migrant workers who went to Germany during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in pursuit of seasonal work. Like their forbears, many Belgians accepted labour assignments in parts of Germany that were close to Belgium. In Rhine-Ruhr cities close to the German-Belgian border like Düsseldorf, volunteers made up a high proportion of Belgian civilian workers. In a close parallel to the seasonal employment patterns of Belgian migrant workers, many Belgian workers completed labour assignments and returned to Belgium in the winter months or delayed the commencement of a labour assignment until after the winter passed, while others would take up a series





of labour assignments in Germany over the course of the occupation. In difficult economic times and with no end to the war in sight, Belgians sought to navigate the best course for themselves and their families. While conscripts were by definition not free, as western Europeans, Belgians were afforded greater rights and legal protections, which ensured they had room for manoeuvre and were able to exercise a significant degree of control over their own destinies.

