

Forced Labour

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This article examines the conditions, forms and consequences of forced labor and recruitment during the First World War, especially in German-occupied northern France, Belgium, Russian-Poland and Lithuania. It will offer an explanation of the extent to which German labor policy from 1914-1918 served as a blueprint for the Nazi forced labor system during the Second World War.

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Introduction

Forced labor can be seen as one of the darkest chapters of the two world wars. It is predominately associated with the Second World War although its use was not limited to this period. During the First World War, German labor policy in occupied territories was increasingly marked by coercion. The boundary between voluntary and forced labor was often blurred. In many cases, voluntary and coercive recruitment and employment coexisted or merged. Nevertheless, it is clear that forced recruitment and labor were components of the First World War. The forced mobilization of civilian labor in occupied territories (and also its failure) can be interpreted in the context of the First World War's "totalizing" tendencies.

In 1930, the International Labor Organization defined coercive labor as "every kind of work or service demanded of a person under threat of punishment and which is not entered into freely."^[1] We will follow this oft-cited definition with the caveat that it is not always possible to clearly distinguish between free and forced labor. It is also important to distinguish forced labor from slavery, the most extreme form of unfree labor. In contrast to forced labor, slavery is primarily a property-related term. Whereas forced laborers are "only" controlled by authorities, slaves are the property of their owners. The era spanning the world wars constitutes a particularly low point in the long history of forced labor. Forced labor has been part of the history of war and, for that matter, of peacetime for millennia.

Its long history cannot be told here in detail.^[2] However, some major points can be given in summary. Forced labor and compelling people to work have long been part of penal law and political persecution and they belong to the established repertoire of political power. The formation of the bourgeois value system since the 18th century played a key role in the development of forced labor. As the importance and social esteem of work increased, not working was increasingly prohibited and sanctioned. People from the lower classes who had no regular work were especially stigmatized and accused of being

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“work-shy.” Economic objectives to make people work were often closely connected with educational ones. One case of this policy can be seen in the German colonies, where “educating for work” (“*Erziehung zur Arbeit*”) was an integral part of the colonial regime. Similar cases can be found in Europe where rigid regimes of forced labor were established in workhouses and penal colonies.^[3] During the First World War, economic and educational aspects of forced labor were connected as well.

When World War I broke out, only a few provisions in [international law](#) dealt with forced labor. The [Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907](#), the central documents of international law in wartime, primarily contained provisions regarding the use of [prisoners of war](#) in labor, which was permitted within limits. Only a few vague statements can be found regarding the free or compulsory labor of civilians. For example, it was stated that the populations of occupied territories could be obliged to do work for the occupying forces to a limited extent.^[4] Therefore, it is no surprise that the provisions of the Hague Conventions did not offer much protection against the abuse of civilian labor. Furthermore, the military culture of the German armed forces was strongly influenced by the idea of the “necessity of war” (“*Kriegsnotwendigkeit*”) which made the army command very critical of any limitation of [warfare](#) by international law.^[5] Military culture and weak legal protection placed a heavy burden on the populations of occupied territories in World War I.

In most of the combatant [war economies](#), acute and ever-increasing labor shortages became palpable as early as the fall of 1914. Military mobilization had severely diminished the workforce in industry and agriculture as well as in small business and handicraft. This was further aggravated by the shift to [armaments production](#). Neither the use of prisoners of war^[6] nor the increased employment of women and young workers^[7] could resolve these shortages.

With the [occupation](#) of enemy territory, the civilian population of this territory presented a possible solution. German authorities were particularly interested in making use of this labor force, since the *Reich* had occupied [most of Belgium, parts of northern France](#), parts of [Russian Poland and the Baltic](#) in 1915. In these regions, there were not only many skilled workers, but also high unemployment. In the eyes of the German authorities, they seemed to be ideal areas for the recruitment of labor – if the people were willing to work in the German war industry. However, recruitment on a – more or less – voluntary basis never met expectations. As a result, forced recruitment and labor was introduced in 1916.

Examples of this can be found in nearly all occupied territories during World War I. [Germany](#), for example, later also used forced labor in occupied [Romania](#) from 1916 to 1918.^[8] Germany’s allies, the [Habsburg Empire](#) and [Bulgaria](#), coerced civilians into labor in the territories they occupied. The recruitment of civilian laborers in the Habsburg military occupation regimes in [Italy, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia](#), Romania and Russian [Poland](#) for example, bore definite coercive elements.^[9] In Bulgarian-occupied Vardar-Macedonia, civilians were deported for forced labor.^[10]

Among the Entente, tsarist [Russia](#) inflicted forced labor upon civilians in occupied Galicia.^[11] The [United Kingdom](#) and [France](#) did not occupy enemy territory to a significant extent. Their response to labor shortages was to rely on domestic labor reservoirs, prisoners of war and [foreign labor, especially from colonies and other overseas suppliers such as China](#).^[12] These employment practices were largely in accordance with international law although they were not always free of coercion and colonial workers were often treated quite poorly.^[13] Due to the Allied [naval blockade](#), the Central Powers were not able to make use of workers from overseas. However, an exception was coercive labor in the colonial theater of war where, [especially in Africa](#), a long tradition of forced labor already existed. A significant example is the coercive recruitment and employment of [African porters](#) during the war in German [East Africa](#). During the [Africa campaigns](#) not only the Germans but also the British and Belgians used more than 1 million coercively recruited carriers and other workers for their extensive [transportation](#), infrastructure works and auxiliary services.^[14] Furthermore, British troops made use of [Indian](#), Burmese and other South Asian workers in [Mesopotamia](#) and France and of Egyptian Labor Corps in [Egypt](#) and Palestine.^[15] In these Labor, Jail or Coolie Corps, the transition between free and coercive labor was smooth. This was particularly true for the recruitment of prisoners for Jail Corps.^[16]

In addition to people in occupied territories, populations in the European authorities’ home countries came to be seen as a source of forced labor. In Germany, the Army High Command led by [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) and [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1937\)](#) demanded – not very successfully in the end – the introduction of a mandatory patriotic service, compelling unemployed German adults to take up work in the war economy in autumn 1916.^[17] In [empires](#) like Austria-Hungary,^[18]

Russia^[19] or the [Ottoman Empire](#), the authorities compelled [ethnic minorities](#) and displaced persons to work. Although the people concerned were citizens of their respective states, they were perceived as strangers or accused of disloyalty.

Consequently, they were treated like foreigners from enemy countries – or even worse, as in the case of the Armenians. Turkish military authorities arranged an estimated 25,000 to 50,000 Armenians, Greeks, and Syrian Christians into “Workers’ Battalions”, which were deployed to construct military infrastructure.^[20]

Up until now, forced labor has been an underexplored topic in most countries. More research has been done on the probably most significant cases of forced labor of civilians in World War I: the forced recruitment and labor of workers from German-occupied Belgium, northern France, Russian Poland and Lithuania. The following will therefore concentrate on these cases. We should note that German labor policies in the occupied territories during the First World War were influenced by three main elements. First, the German Empire had an existing policy of recruitment of foreign laborers, especially the hiring of seasonal agricultural laborers from Russian Poland. Second, Germany had previous experience with “foreign” labor in its colonies, though the importance of these experiences should not be overestimated. Third, the war itself had, from its outbreak, presented the military, economic interests, the state and the administration with unfamiliar problems and challenges.

Development of Labor Policy and Forced Labor, 1914-1916

In Germany, the economic boom of the 1890s had caused a serious labor shortage which was remedied by a yearly influx of hundreds of thousands of foreign laborers in agriculture and industry. Polish seasonal workers from Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire, in particular, streamed into Germany in great numbers at the beginning of each year. In 1914, Germany, with its 1.2 million immigrants, had the second largest foreign work force in the world after the [United States](#). In spite of scattered elements of coercion and a wide-ranging system of restrictions imposed on seasonal workers from Russian Poland, there was not, strictly speaking, a system of forced labor in place before 1914.^[21]

As the switch to a war economy further raised demand for labor, the Prussian government, in the fall of 1914, forbade the return of laborers to the Russian Empire, which had become enemy territory. Other German states followed suit. From then on, workers from the Russian Empire, forced to stay in Germany and not allowed to change jobs without official permission from their employers, were de facto forced laborers.^[22]

However, as this workforce remained insufficient to meet the immense demand for labor, the acquisition of additional labor from the occupied territories took on a greater importance. In the summer of 1915, the German and Austro-Hungarian Armies conquered Russian Poland, Lithuania and parts of Latvia and [Belorussia](#). Germany had already occupied most of [Belgium](#) and parts of northern France in 1914. Whereas in the larger part of Belgium and Russian Poland a German civilian administration was established (so-called *Generalgouvernements*), military administrations were installed in the occupied territories of northern France and the Baltic.

In the occupied territories, the German authorities first tried to recruit labor along voluntary lines. Soon after the occupation, the *Generalgouvernements* were markedly covered with a network of recruitment offices. In Russian Poland, and particularly in Belgium, high unemployment made voluntary recruitment look promising.^[23]

In Russian Poland, recruitment met, at first, with great success. By March 1916, some 100,000 to 120,000 additional workers had joined the 300,000 men and women already in Germany,^[24] even though, like the established workers, these new workers were forbidden to change jobs and residence after their arrival. Although the German authorities tried to hide the coercive character of work in Germany, most people in the occupied territories must soon have heard of the true conditions. The success of recruitment was, then, due to the economic crisis which offered the population few employment alternatives. The German civil administration did not only exploit distress for recruitment purposes but also actively increased economic pressure by shutting down businesses and cutting off support to the unemployed. However, even with relatively successful recruitment in Russian Poland, the number of recruits fell far short of the enormous demands of the German war economy.

In contrast, the achievements of recruitment were meager in the [Belgian Generalgouvernement](#). By the end of October 1916, only 30,000 workers had been recruited altogether.^[25] There were various reasons for this: the work of the U.S.-led “[Commission for Relief in Belgium](#)” with its Belgian pendant, the “*Comité National*,” secured a minimum of food supplies for the

population of occupied Belgium. Furthermore, [patriotic motives](#) prevented the Belgians from taking up work in the [German war economy](#). After the German aggression against [neutral](#) Belgium and during the harsh occupation regime it was impossible for many Belgians to work for the enemy – an attitude supported by the [Belgian government](#) in exile and the Belgian underground movement. In addition, there was no tradition of seasonal work in Germany for Belgians as there was for inhabitants of Russian Poland. Before 1914, Belgian workers had mostly gone to France, not to Germany.

German authorities also recruited labor in the occupied territories of France and the Baltic. However, most of this labor was not brought to Germany but employed on the spot. In the occupied territories of the Baltic, then called “[Ober Ost](#),” the priority of the military administration was the exploitation of the extensive agricultural and forestry resources for the German war effort.^[26] In both the Belgian and French operations and staging areas, the [German High Command](#) and/or the general commands of the separate armies used labor to meet their needs, for example in the repair and extension of infrastructure.

In these areas the German military administration soon shifted from recruiting voluntary workers to forcing people to work because labor on the open market was often in short supply. This shift was facilitated by the Imperial German Army’s habit of commandeering labor and, in Ober Ost, also by the occupiers’ attitude of contempt for the locals – an attitude expressed in numerous statements by German officials. In Ober Ost, farmers were forced to cultivate abandoned fields on estates or help with road work. With time, such *corvées* multiplied to become a heavy burden on farmers. At least they were usually allowed to return home in the evenings, enabling them to provide for themselves and not have to live in camps.^[27] In the northern French staging area (*Etappe*), some 20,000 women and girls, especially from the industrial towns of Lille, Roubaix and Tourcoing, were brutally assembled by German soldiers and officers and carried off to do agricultural labor in the region at Easter in 1916.^[28]

An all-encompassing coercive policy did not exist in the Belgian and [Polish Generalgouvernements](#) until the fall of 1916. In Belgium, the governor-general issued an “Ordnance against the Reluctance to Work” (*Verordnung gegen die Arbeitsscheu*) to threaten workers with coercion if they refused certain jobs or tasks. In this manner, the German civilian administration had already established the notion of labor coercion.^[29] However, actual coercive measures remained restricted to small groups of workers or the personnel of specific enterprises such as the railways which were now under German military control. In Russian Poland, the German authorities were faced with growing problems in the recruitment of additional labor. They concluded that pressure to accept work for Germany had to be intensified in order to increase the number of workers. However, most of the civil administrators in the *Generalgouvernement* advocated increased economic pressure instead of coercion.

The Peak of Forced Labor

In response to the urgent situation facing the Central Powers, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were promoted from the leadership of the military administration of Ober Ost to the Army High Command in late August 1916. Hindenburg and especially Ludendorff assumed their new task with the conviction that the war could be won only through a fierce concentration of forces. Other considerations, such as humanitarian or legal ones, had to yield.^[30] The implications for labor policy were clear: if voluntary recruitment proved insufficient, force could be used to recruit and deploy workers. By the fall of 1916, these concepts of “[total war](#)”^[31] – as it came to be called in the interwar years – had already been trialed for a year by Ludendorff’s military administration in Ober Ost.

Soon after the assumption of command, Hindenburg and Ludendorff took the first steps toward establishing a new labor policy in the German power sphere. In Germany, they demanded the introduction of mandatory patriotic service.^[32] In the occupied territories, workers had to be forced to serve the German war economy if they did not do so voluntarily. The “Auxiliary Service Law” (*Hilfsdienstgesetz*), which mandated service for Germans and was passed in December 1916, was so watered down that it hardly corresponded to Ludendorff’s vision. Forced labor requisitions were soon carried out in the occupied territories, albeit to varying degrees.

On 13 September and again on 3 October 1916, Ludendorff instructed the governor-generals of Warsaw and Belgium to institute forced labor, even though he did not formally have authority over them. His memorandum on this instruction blamed the unemployed in the occupied territories on “reluctance to work” (literally, “*Arbeitsscheu*,” “work-shyness”). The unemployed had to be obligated to work and German officials must be allowed to force the populace in occupied territories to work even outside of their home areas.^[33] On the [Western Front](#), army leadership issued ordinances generalizing coercive labor on 3 October 1916,

at first in the Belgian and French operations and staging areas (Operationsgebiet and Etappengebiet, respectively) that were under its direct control.

The forcibly recruited workers (both formerly employed and unemployed) were allocated to so-called “Civil Workers’ Battalions” (*Zivil-Arbeiter-Bataillone*, ZAB). The workers in these battalions were formally considered to be civilian prisoners; they stood under military control, had to wear specific brassards and were usually housed in small camps.^[34] Their working and living conditions were abysmal, as even the Flemish “activists,” nationalists who cooperated with the German authorities, shamefacedly had to admit after a tour of inspection.^[35] At the Western Front, civilian workers in ZAB were forced to work alongside POWs – mainly Russians – behind the German lines at the risk of their lives. The Geneva and Hague Conventions allowed this neither for civilian workers nor for POWs.^[36] Altogether, some 62,000 Belgian and northern French civilian workers were forced into the ZAB. Harsh conditions, brutal treatment, illnesses and undernourishment led to high mortality rates during deployment – one source mentions 1,056 dead, another 1,298, not counting those who were sent home to die.^[37]

In the Belgian *Generalgouvernement*, deportations of workers started on 26 October 1916. The selection of deportees was left to local military commanders. Arbitrary local decisions led to numerous encroachments even on the limits set by the ordnance: many employed men were taken as well. Workers were herded together for inspection. Those selected for deportation were held under military guard for hours or days before being transported by rail, often in unheated cattle-cars, to Germany. Witnesses’ descriptions of the scenes – the families left behind, the deportees’ woefully inadequate food and clothing and the dismal weather – paint a picture of despair.^[38] Even German witnesses were struck by the sheer brutality of the proceedings. Altogether, 60,000 Belgian civilians were deported to perform forced labor in Germany between 26 October 1916, when the deportations started, and February 1917, when they were effectively stopped.

In Germany, the deportees were initially housed in “distribution centers” (“*Verteilungsstellen*”) and “industrial laborers’ lodgings” (“*Unterkunftsstellen für Industriearbeiter*”) – names deliberately chosen to avoid the term “concentration camp” which by then had already acquired a pejorative connotation.^[39] The hastily constructed camps were brutally run, chaotically organized, ill-equipped, unsanitary and insufficiently provisioned. They were rife with hunger and disease. As with the ZAB prisoners, mortality was high. An estimated 900 Belgian labor deportees, at the very least, died in the camps or at their places of coerced work.^[40] It should be noted that the mistreatment of Belgian workers was not just a result of the improvised and chaotic preparation of the deportations. There was method to the brutality. The “basic rules” for the treatment of Belgian deportees, laid down by the Prussian War Ministry in December 1916, are revealing enough:

Conditions in the distribution centers must compel all to sign a labor contract. (...) Stern discipline and forcible employment at the distribution center itself must compel every Belgian to consider any chance at well-paid work outside of the distribution center to be an improvement in his situation.^[41]

In Russian Poland, Governor-General [Hans von Beseler \(1850-1921\)](#) issued the “Ordnance against the Reluctance to Work” on 4 October ^[42] which closely followed Ludendorff’s blueprint. On 20 October 1916, a corresponding order was decreed for Ober Ost.^[43]

In this way, forced labor was introduced in the occupied territories at the [Eastern Front](#). The terms “unwilling to work” and “unemployed” were soon applied in a most arbitrary manner. German authorities in many places were unable to get hold of the unemployed and forced recruitment drives often turned into wild raids that swept up destitute-looking people and random passersby.^[44] In the Polish *Generalgouvernement*, forced recruitment was carried out in numerous places but most forced laborers only worked for short periods on local projects. Only in the Łódź region did the authorities round up some 5,000 persons who were deported to far-away sites and forced to work for long durations. These people were overwhelmingly Jewish men who were brought to camps where they met representatives of the so-called “*Deutsche Arbeiter-Zentrale*” (DAZ) presenting them with “voluntary” work in Germany. Refusal landed them in ZAB that were stationed in Ober Ost.^[45] Workers in ZAB could be deployed for long stretches of time far from home in road and railroad building or harvest and forestry work.^[46] Some scholars have suggested that forced laborers were deported to Germany.^[47] This was not the case: first, those responsible for the coercive measures deemed them easier to justify in international law if the workers remained in the occupied territories;^[48] second, in Ober Ost itself there was a great demand for labor and the work there did not require the skills needed in Germany.

In Ober Ost, at least 10,000 people were recruited for ZAB and many more for short-term work gangs.^[49] Here, the numerous forced recruitments, unlike those in the *Generalgouvernement*, were not limited to particular areas or groups but affected the entire region and the general population. Still, in Ober Ost as well, Jews were overrepresented in forced labor.^[50] The sources are lacking to determine whether this was a result of [anti-Semitism](#) or of a higher rate of unemployment among Jews that made them more visible to the German authorities. It is certain that, in both occupied zones, German administrators held the population in general in low regard – a stance expressed in many a statement. The military administration in Ober Ost, especially, adopted a colonial mentality and deemed the population “work-shy,” backward, dependent and dirty.^[51] This contempt may well have helped to overcome reservations. The head of administration in Lithuania, [Franz-Josef von Isenburg-Birstein \(1869-1939\)](#), for one, thought that forced labor would raise Lithuanians’ labor efficiency.^[52]

As at the Western Front, workers faced very harsh living and working conditions in the ZAB. For a pittance, they had to do heavy labor for nine hours daily. Lodgings, clothing, food and medicine were in very short supply. Due to these conditions and to the fact that the arbitrary raids had nabbed many elderly and sick people, illness and mortality were high. In addition, there were many reports of mistreatment. Consequently, productivity was low and out of proportion with the costs and effort involved in overseeing and provisioning the captives. Workers could not leave the camp and dismissal was only possible when they could no longer work or if they signed up for voluntary labor.^[53] Numerous workers fled; others even mutilated themselves to be allowed to leave.^[54] The German-Jewish writer [Arnold Zweig \(1887-1968\)](#), who served in the administration of Ober Ost, described the ZAB as “a kind of Siberia.”^[55]

Criticism, Suspension and Maintenance of Coercion

The “Belgian deportations” met with vehement criticism both internationally and domestically. In Germany, both Socialist factions as well as the Catholic Centre Party (*Zentrumspartei*) raised objections. Representatives from other parties criticized the measures in the Reichstag, both in the general assembly and in its Main Committee. However, no clear and official protest was voiced. The “liberal imperialist” representatives found fault with the deportations mainly because of – justified – fears of a negative impact on relations with the U.S. Many in the civilian administration of the Belgian *Generalgouvernement* thought the deportations a mistake, though others, like the expressionist poet [Gottfried Benn \(1886-1956\)](#), who was stationed in Brussels as a military physician, applauded the measure.

Among Belgians, the deportations elicited the expected storm of outrage. Cardinal [Désiré-Joseph Mercier \(1851-1926\)](#), the influential and charismatic Primate of the Catholic Church in Belgium, condemned them in vehement terms. A vast array of associations, professional unions, political organizations and parties and a great many individual citizens wrote letters of protest to the governor-general. The Belgian government-in-exile in Le Havre (France) set up a protest campaign abroad. In Entente states and in many neutral nations, public opinion was swayed anew by sympathy for the Belgians’ plight and condemnation of the new misdeeds of “Prussian-German [militarism](#).” For the as-yet neutral U.S., these labor practices played a particularly important role: the “Belgian deportations” together with unrestricted [submarine warfare](#) decisively influenced a shift in U.S. public opinion towards entering the war on the Entente side.^[56]

By January 1917, it was clear that the coercive measures inflicted on Belgian workers fell short of high expectations. The German war economy still suffered from a shortage of labor. Barely one out of four deportees had ended up signing a regular work contract. German businesses found their work unsatisfactory and lost interest in Belgian forced labor.^[57] After renewed pleas from the *Generalgouvernement* to end the deportations, the imperial chancellor, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of the Interior, the minister-president of Bavaria, several Reichstag representatives, the Prussian War Ministry and the Army High Command finally gave in. Following some rocky negotiations, an imperial decree of 14 March 1917 suspended the deportations from the *Generalgouvernement*, though it did not put an end to forced labor in general. On 5 June 1917, the Prussian War Ministry decreed a “complete halt” to forced labor. The 20,000 to 25,000 deportees still in Germany at that time were sent home in the summer.^[58] In the militarily-ruled operations and staging areas of Belgium and France, forced labor continued until the end of the war.^[59]

After the “Belgian deportations” debacle, German labor policies in the Belgian *Generalgouvernement* reverted to voluntary recruitment in an intensified manner. The total number of Belgian workers recruited for the German war economy rose to

160,000 by the end of the war, compared to a mere 22,000 at the start of the deportations.^[60] This remarkable rise was due, on the one hand, to the fear of new coercive measures and to the systematic and deliberate crippling of large swaths of the Belgian economy which further depleted employment; and, on the other hand, to enticements such as higher sign-up bonuses, financial and material support for workers' families and other advantages.^[61]

Compared to the Belgian case, the forced recruitment and labor on the Eastern Front evoked much less criticism, in particular at the international level. This difference was partly due to the fact that there was no Polish or Lithuanian government to protest on behalf of "its" nationals and the tsarist government did not show much interest in the fate of its minority subjects. Nevertheless, in Russian Poland, more specifically in the *Generalgouvernement* of Warsaw, forced recruitment was already suspended in December 1916 due to the objections of German-Jewish organizations as well as the negative impact it had on voluntary recruitment for Germany – and, even more so, on the proclamation of a new Polish state and the recruitment of a Polish army under German-Austrian leadership.^[62] Moreover, the authorities had to admit to lacking the means to coerce: they often failed to get hold of people targeted for forced labor.^[63] As a result, the civilian administrators in the *Generalgouvernement* soon redoubled their efforts to recruit voluntary workers for Germany, efforts which had been ongoing throughout the war. They made use of the economic crisis as well as of the threat of renewed coercion and offered promises of vacations and better working conditions.^[64] The effort to recruit Jewish labor, not hitherto a success, was stepped up.^[65]

The military administration in Ober Ost held on to forced recruitment and labor, despite low productivity and protests in the occupied territories, in the Reichstag and on an international level. The regime refused to be told how to handle a population it considered incapable of self-determination. Plans to proclaim an independent state and to mobilize the inhabitants into an army, as in Russian Poland, did not, at first, exist. The military could not imagine opening up and exploiting the territory without forced labor.^[66] Moreover, coercion in the occupied territories of Eastern Europe met with much less vigorous protests than did the deportation of Belgian workers. This made it easier for the military administration in Ober Ost to continue coercive recruitment and labor.

Only Ludendorff's decision in the summer of 1917 to establish self-governance for the inhabitants of Ober Ost generated a slight change in labor policy. On 22 September 1917, one day after elections in the Lithuanian provincial assembly, the so-called Taryba, were held, the ZAB were officially dissolved as a gesture of goodwill.^[67] Their dissolution, however, did not equal the end of coercion: workers were simply transferred to other units and continued to labor under similar conditions. Forced recruitment in fact continued until late into 1918. Coercive labor in Ober Ost – and in the territories further east occupied in spring 1918 – only came to a close with the end of German occupation in November 1918.^[68]

Lessons of Forced Labor after 1918

The "Belgian deportations" became the object of vehement political, juridical and journalistic confrontations after the war. These deportations were declared war crimes by the Paris Peace Treaty. In the 1920s, Belgian courts convicted some German offenders, at times in absentia, in some cases to long prison sentences. However, the prosecution was mainly entrusted to the [Imperial court in Leipzig](#) where it hit a dead end.^[69]

In contrast, forced recruitment and labor in France, Russian Poland and the Baltic were little discussed after the war. They were not mentioned in the Treaty of Versailles and Poland and Lithuania, which had recently become independent states, did not receive compensation for the forced labor of their workers. The reasons for this are not completely clear, but strong factors seem to be that these new states had not fought alongside the Allies and that they were dealing with other urgent matters. In addition, the workers from these countries had not been deported to Germany which made it more difficult to condemn this as a breach of international law.

In Germany, after 1918, the coercive measures were considered by many participants and by the relevant ministries as a failure – but only from an economic, not from a moral standpoint. While the inefficiency of forced recruitment and labor was clear, these measures were never considered to be breaches of international law or ethical lapses. The only public criticism of coercion as unjust came from the parties on the left and Jewish organizations. Such statements fell on deaf ears in the collective shock of defeat and the humiliation of Versailles. Critics of the war were blamed for harming German interests and playing into the hands of the Allies. Already during the war, the military had never tired of justifying coercion as a "necessity of war." Forced labor had

been, it was also alleged, the only way to combat unemployment and secure food supplies in occupied territories. These justifications of coercion became even more significant after the German defeat, as the Allies demanded reparations and the extradition of responsible parties, including [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#), Hindenburg and Ludendorff.^[70]

Moreover, military and right-wing circles were gradually convinced that German conduct in the First World War had not been brutal but rather too considerate. Well-known authors, especially Ludendorff, concluded from the lost war that a future “total war” must entail a more complete and more ruthless mobilization of the entire labor force. The exploitation of future occupied territories, particularly in Eastern Europe, was considered crucial. The experiences of the First World War confirmed the opinion in these circles that the peoples of Eastern Europe had to be treated ruthlessly – and that this was possible because international public opinion cared much more about events in Western Europe.^[71] The Nazis, especially, adopted Ludendorff’s “lessons” drawn from the First World War with eagerness, albeit with some modifications. At his trial in 1924, [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#) declared that he had read Ludendorff’s *Kriegführung und Politik (War and Politics)* with enthusiasm.^[72]

After 1933, and even more after 1939, the ideas of Ludendorff became government policy, especially with regard to the mobilization of all resources for war. Initially, this total mobilization was applied to the German population rather than to foreign workers. While Germans were practically subjected to labor service by 1939, the recruitment and employment of foreign workers was not yet characterized by coercion. Even after the outbreak of the Second World War, there was no talk of the systematic use of forced foreign labor. German authorities simply carried out more focused and effective recruitment of labor in Poland. Many contradictions and setbacks characterized the road to a widespread coercive system.^[73] For example, hundreds of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war could not be used as forced laborers because neglect in the camps left them starving or too weak to work.^[74]

In occupied Western Europe – especially in Belgium – a coercive system was established again between 1940 and 1944. Despite the negative experiences of the First World War, German labor policy became radicalized over the course of war, following the same pattern of free and then coerced labor. However, the system in Western Europe was less brutal and intensive than in Eastern Europe.

In the Second World War, Nazi ideology rendered occupation rule in Eastern Europe racist and brutal to an immeasurably greater and far more fundamental extent than had been the case during the First World War. In their selection of administrators, the Nazi leadership deliberately passed over the experienced personnel from the General Government or Ober Ost and selected instead a new type of “German man.”^[75] The governor-general of Poland, [Hans Frank \(1900-1946\)](#), for example, only wanted to employ “pure, activist National-Socialist fighters.”^[76] The genocide against East European Jewry represented an immense rupture with the First World War, when Jews had been exploited and discriminated against, but certainly not systematically murdered. Genocide fundamentally altered German labor policies. It allowed for the total exploitation of East European Jews. Given terminally insufficient rations, worked to complete exhaustion and dying in extremely high numbers, the Jews selected for forced labor became “less than slaves,” to borrow Mark Spoerer’s words.^[77] No workers had been treated like this in the First World War.

Conclusion

Forced labor was not a new phenomenon in the Second World War. Rather, it already existed during the First World War. In general, civilian forced labor has to be distinguished from the work of prisoners of war which is – within limits – covered by international law. During the First World War, The Hague and Geneva Conventions provided only vague provisions for civilians forced to labor.

Most occupied areas during World War I were in the hands of the Central Powers. Furthermore, the Central Powers had a particular necessity for labor because they were confronted with a severe shortage of materials and manpower and were cut off from the international labor market. Therefore, the exploitation of manpower in occupied territories was of much greater importance to the Central Powers than to the Allies who could, for instance, use manpower from their colonies instead. The employment of colonial subjects by the Allies cannot be considered as compulsory work with the exception of those coercively recruited and employed for emergency military services in the colonies themselves. Therefore, most of forced labor during World War I took place in the sphere of the Central Powers.

In the territories occupied by Germany, Belgium, northern France, Russian Poland and Lithuania, voluntary and coerced labor recruitment existed consecutively as well as simultaneously. Until the fall of 1916 the civilian administrations in the *Generalgouvernements* of Belgium and Warsaw recruited voluntary labor to work in Germany, using the economic hardship of those regions as an enticement. However, once in Germany, workers from the Russian Empire could not return home. Since most workers knew this, one might call their “choice” a voluntary entry into forced labor, propelled by economic necessity. This kind of forced labor may be described as moderate in the sense that workers enjoyed some influence over their working conditions since employers were dependent on their labor.

In contrast to the civilian administration in the General Governments, the military administration in Ober Ost (and also in northern France) resorted to forced recruitment and labor from the beginning. In Ober Ost, few workers were available on the labor market and the military administration wanted to carry out many projects in remote regions. In addition, the military administration considered the inhabitants unwilling to work which strengthened its conviction that coercion was required to exploit the land. Until the fall of 1916, forced labor in Ober Ost could be considered moderate as well because it was of limited duration and the workers were not housed in camps. Up to the fall of 1916, then, both voluntary and “moderate forced labor,” the boundary between which was sometimes blurry, existed in German-occupied zones. However, various actors in the German Empire increasingly considered existing labor measures inadequate for procuring sufficient labor. With the assumption of the third Army High Command by Hindenburg and Ludendorff in the fall of 1916, a new form of labor, which we can term “hard coercive labor”, appeared. Organized into battalions and considered civilian prisoners, forced laborers had to work far from home under considerably worse conditions. Their only recourse against conditions of work in the ZAB was flight.

While forced recruitment occurred in the *Generalgouvernements*, Ober Ost and the operation and military staging areas on the Western Front, hard coercive labor was employed only in the ZAB in the Ober Ost and on the Western Front. The military administrations in Ober Ost, France and Belgium enforced coerced recruitment to a much greater extent and held on to this labor policy longer. Overly imbued with a sense of its own mission, the military administration in Ober Ost particularly put its faith in force, ignored criticism and proceeded with far less consideration towards the civilian population. Ober Ost was thus an important laboratory for forced labor and “total war,” a fact which scholarship must now recognize.

After the armistice, the kind of forced labor practiced in the First World War was widely considered, in Germany, to have been an economic failure rather than a moral transgression. This blind spot facilitated the emergence of an essentially broader and much more brutal coercive system under German rule in the Second World War. Greater efficiency in labor recruitment as well as statements made by important actors indicate that lessons had indeed been drawn from the labor policy of the First World War. However, rather than furnishing a blueprint or concrete directions, the First World War formed, instead, an abstract “experiential background.” A specific analysis of how these “lessons” were learned will be the task of future research.

These findings are primarily relevant for the German case. In other cases such as that of the Habsburg or Ottoman Empires, the question of continuity of forced labor does not arise in the same way as these empires ceased to exist after 1918. In any event, cases of forced labor outside the German sphere of control need to be researched in more detail to broaden the picture of forced labor in World War I and to improve our understanding of the development and context of forced labor in general.

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Notes

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