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The Meaning of Free Labour after the Second World War: Worker Protest against *Arbeitsverpflichtung* and *Mobilisation Civile* in Postwar Germany and Belgium

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the impact of notions of "free labour" on industrial conflicts in postwar Europe. More specifically, it compares worker resistance against the (re-)introduction of labour conscription in two coal basins: the Ruhr in Germany and the Hainaut in Belgium. As coal was vital to the reconstruction effort, governments in both countries issued decrees that either compelled workers to accept a job in the coal sector or prohibited miners from changing jobs. If *mobilisation civile* in Belgium and *Arbeitsverpflichtung* in Germany were similarly ineffective in addressing the fundamental problems plaguing the coal sector, miner resistance against these schemes took very different forms in the two regions. In the Hainaut, the reintroduction of wartime constraints triggered a strike wave that was couched in a language of worker rights and freedoms. In the Ruhr, workers representatives steered clear from such ideological arguments, but saw the labour conscripts vote with their feet and abandon the coal mines en masse. In linking these differences to their pre-war and wartime legacies, the article draws attention to the longue durée of controversies over (un)free labour in democratic Western Europe.

Keywords: *free labour; labour conscription; coal mining; Western Europe; postwar reconstruction*

The end of the Second World War represented a watershed moment in the recognition of workers' rights as human rights. Where an earlier generation of international activists and reformers had mostly focused their energies on improving working conditions, the horrors of Nazi labour policies convinced those drawing up blueprints for the postwar world that the rights and freedoms of workers had to be enshrined in law. In its Philadelphia Declaration of May 1944, ceremonially signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the White House, the International Labour Organization stipulat-

DOI: 10.46586/mts.69.2023.15-31

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ed that “labour is not a commodity” and listed a whole series of worker prerogatives: freedom of expression and association at work, the right to freely pursue their material well-being, and the right of collective bargaining.[1] These efforts on the part of labour campaigners to push the issue of workers’ rights up the human rights agenda bore fruit. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ratified by the United Nations in December 1948, not only proscribed slavery in all of its forms (Article 4) but also accorded workers free choice of employment, equal pay for equal work, an existence worthy of human dignity, the right to form and join trade unions (Article 23), and the right to rest and leisure (Article 24).[2]

Much as “the spirit of Philadelphia” has been celebrated by labour activists and historians alike, controversies over workers’ rights and freedoms would continue to rage over the following years.[3] The proper definition of (un)free labour was hotly debated between the Eastern and Western camps within the United Nations, with the former wanting to broaden the concept of forced labour to include work under the threat of unemployment in capitalist countries and the latter keeping to a narrower understanding of work under duress in the labour camps that were so widespread in the Communist bloc.[4] These arguments over what constituted free labour were not limited to theoretical debates in the smoke-filled conference rooms in which international organizations deliberated, but were also fought on the ground in liberated Europe. For the end of the war did not immediately spell the end of unfree labour across the continent. Governments in East and West drew extensively on the forced labour of prisoners of war and former collaborators to address a desperate manpower shortage in vital sectors such as agriculture and mining.[5]

To understand the continuity of such constraints across the 1945 divide, it is crucial to consider the deep imprint that forms of unfree labour had left on wartime societies. The war had of course seen military conscription, but also normalized labour conscription. In fact, compulsory labour for civilians was implemented not only in Nazi Europe, but also in democratic Great Britain. Here, many thousands of young men—the so-called “Bevin Boys,” named after the Minister of Labour who had ordered labour conscription—were sent to work in the mines from 1943 onwards, with the last conscripts only released in 1948.[6] This already points to the fact that the problems that governments were facing in the coal sector did not disappear in 1945. In many European countries, coal mines were kept on a war footing for years after the liberation. As “battles” to produce more coal were proclaimed, miners were often likened to soldiers in a narrative that went back to the First World War.[7] Yet, soldiers, especially those in active battle, are of course not free labourers in a Philadelphian sense. This article thus focuses on the tensions between the demands of postwar reconstruction and workers’ rights and freedoms.

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[1] Declaration concerning the aims and purposes of the International Labour Organisation, 10 May 1944. www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:62:0::NO:62:P62_LIST_ENTRIE_ID:2453907:NO#declaration (last consulted: 18 January 2021).

[2] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948. www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/ (last consulted: 18 January 2021).

[3] Alain Supiot, *L’esprit de Philadelphie: La justice sociale face au marché total* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2010).

[4] Sandrine Kott, “The Forced Labor Issue between Human and Social Rights, 1947–1957,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 3, no. 3 (2012): 321–335.

[5] Hanna Diamond, “’Prisoners of the Peace’: German Prisoners-of-War in Rural France 1944–48,” *European History Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2013): 442–463; Jerzy Kochanowski, *W polskiej niewoli: niemieccy jeńcy wojenni w Polsce, 1945–1950* (Warsaw: Neriton, 2001).

To that end, the article deals with one set of workers’ rights that was infringed upon in the name of postwar reconstruction: the free choice of employment and the right to change jobs. More specifically, it explores the response to decrees either compelling workers to accept a job in the coal sector or prohibiting miners from terminating their contracts. Coal, without which industry as a whole could not be put back on its feet, was of course vital to the reconstruction effort, and governments were desperate to stop the post-liberation exodus from the mines. Yet, the coercive measures they implemented to drive up coal production reminded coal miners and trade unionists alike of Nazi campaigns to requisition workers for key sectors.

The article compares labour movement reactions to the (re-)introduction of labour conscription in two postwar coal basins: the Hainaut in Belgium and the Ruhr in Germany. In both regions, a roughly similar scenario played out in the wake of the war. As the coal sector struggled to recruit and—in particular—to retain manpower, governments issued ordinances forcing workers to the mines and criminalizing no-shows. Yet, these measures were resisted by the miners and did not deliver the expected results, forcing governments to eventually trade the stick of coercion for the carrot of improved conditions. Insofar as the struggles over the restrictions placed upon workers’ rights have been addressed in historiography, it is mostly in the context of the postwar production drive, the trade union rivalries between communists and social democrats, or the legal framework that facilitated labour conscription.[8] In contrast, this article studies these struggles from the perspective of free labour. It explores how miners responded to the violation of workers' rights by governments that were, rhetorically at least, committed to freedom and democracy. To what extent was resistance against labour conscription informed by conceptions of free labour? What impact did the Nazi experience have on the framing of grievances over the retention of wartime restrictions? And did the struggles to restore the free choice of employment expose any rifts within the postwar labour movement?

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[6] Tim Hickman, *Called Up, Sent Down: The Bevin Boys’ War* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008).

[7] Nicolas Verschueren, “Mineur au front, soldat au fond. La formation d’une icône de la classe ouvrière,” *Revue du Nord* 417, no. 4 (2016): 855–870.

[8] Martin Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944–1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 143–146; Mark Roseman, *Recasting the Ruhr, 1945–1958: Manpower, Economic Recovery, and Labour Relations* (New York: Berg Publishers, 1992), 28–45; Guy Coppieters, “L’État, un mauvais industriel? De strijd om het Belgische steenkoolbeleid, 1901–1951,” PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Brussel (2017); Rik Hemmerijckx, *Van Verzet tot Koude Oorlog: 1940–1949. Machtsstrijd om het ABVV* (Brussels: VUB Press 2003), 175–178; Matthias Krempl, “‘Eine wirkliche Menschenpflege’. Ar-

The article answers these questions on the basis of primary sources from state and trade union archives, including strike reports, resolutions adopted by workers, and trade union bulletins. In doing so, it brings to light interesting contrasts between miner pushback against state coercion to in the two regions under review. Whereas industrial protest in the Hainaut was outspoken and couched in a language of fundamental workers' rights, resistance in the Ruhr was subtler and mostly steered clear from grand ideological arguments. To account for these divergences, the article first sketchs the post-liberation situation in the two coal basins. Although pits in both regions suffered from a disastrous shortage of manpower, the diverse legacies of the war years not only affected the policy instruments that governments had at their disposal to restrict workers' rights, but also shaped the responses of trade unionists and miners to these policies. The second and third sections deal with these responses, addressing the strike wave in the Hainaut coal mines after the Belgian government passed its *mobilisation civile* (civil mobilization) decrees in April 1945 and the mass absenteeism among those who were requisitioned for work in Ruhr pits under the *Arbeitsverpflichtung* (labour compulsion) order issued by the Allied Control Council in January 1946. In doing so, the article demonstrates how worker defiance of labour conscription in postwar Belgium and Germany, even if the outcome was similar, drew its inspiration from completely different experiences.

Mobilisation civile and *Arbeitsverpflichtung* were above all responses to the sluggish revival of the coal sector in the initial months after the liberation. The twin effects of war and liberation—the disruptions and devastations caused by bombing campaigns, the social conflicts that characterized the liberation era, and the release of forced labourers—had seen coal production in both the Hainaut and the Ruhr drop to the lowest levels on record. Despite the best efforts of incoming governments to facilitate a speedy revitalization of the coal sector, daily output stalled far below prewar averages.[9] If this was the result of the collapse of both the number of miners and their productivity, it was only the former that governments could affect in the short term.

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beitsmarktbehördliche Zwangsmaßnahmen nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg in Österreich und Deutschland im Vergleich," *Beiträge zur Rechtsgeschichte Österreichs* 6, no. 1 (2016): 43–57.

[9] In Belgium, coal output in February 1945 stood at only 20 percent of 1938 levels. Philippe Sunou, *Les prissoniers de guerre allemands en Belgique et la bataille de charbon, 1945–1947* (Brussels: Musée Royal de l'Armée, 1980), 5.

Within months of the liberation, therefore, officials in both countries were drawing up decrees directing desperately-needed manpower to the mines. In Belgium, this process was set in motion when a fresh government—a broad coalition of socialists, communists, Catholics, and liberals under the leadership of the socialist Achille Van Acker—took office in February 1945. It immediately launched a "battle for coal" (*bataille du charbon*), upon which Van Acker staked his reputation: alongside his duties as prime minister, he took responsibility for the newly-created portfolio of minister of coal and chaired the Coal Cabinet that coordinated coal policy. Quickly nicknamed Achille Charbon (Achille Coal), Van Acker initially set out to make the mining profession more attractive. In his governmental declaration before parliament, he held out the prospect of a miner's statute (*Statut du Mineur*) that would offer miners full pensions after thirty years of service, exemptions from military conscription, a bonus for new recruits, and cheap mortgages to buy or build a house.

In the acute subsistence crisis that swept the Hainaut in the first months of 1945, however, such promises made little impact. The desperate shortages of basic foodstuffs saw miners leave the pits in droves to seek more profitable employment elsewhere. An April 1945 report on the "alarming exodus of miners" explained how management at the Grand Hornu pits in Boussu had received so many resignations that it feared underground operations would have to be wound down the following week. Worse, the majority of those who had given notice were experienced pitmen who could not be easily replaced, especially locomotive drivers, operators of special machines, and greasers. There was great demand for such skilled workers, who could easily find new jobs in the American military depots or across the border in the coal mines of northern France. In addition, these jobs came with wages and, especially, with benefits in kind—cigarettes, chocolate, wine, all of which were much sought after on the flourishing black market—that the Belgian coal sector simply could not match.[10]

With reports warning that the relentless "desertion from the mines" was threatening Belgian industry "in its very existence,"[11] the government decided to take radical measures. On 14 April 1945, it ordered a mobilisation civile for those sectors that were considered vital to the national economy: coal, electricity, and gas; water distribution, flour mills, yeast plants, and bakeries; and transport enterprises.[12] Under this decree, all workers currently employed in these sectors were prohibited from changing jobs, and all workers who had left these sectors since the liberation in September 1944 were forced to return to their old jobs or accept a job offered by the state. Coupled with a further decree freezing wages and banning strikes for a period of three months, these measures completely undercut the strong bargaining position that (skilled) miners had enjoyed vis-à-vis their employers.

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[10] Report on exodus from the mines, 5 April 1945, Archives Généraux du Royaume, Brussels (hereafter AGR), Cabinets Affaires Économiques, 603.

[11] Désertion des mines, 11 April 1945, AGR, Cabinets Affaires Économiques, 603.

[12] André Woronoff, "Le mouvement social en 1945," *Bulletin de l'Institut de Recherches Économiques et Sociales* 12, no. 3 (1946): 258.

In occupied Germany, the Allied military governments did not in principal have to issue new decrees to direct workers to the mines, as the Nazi era Compulsory Service Law (*Dienstverpflichtungsgesetz*) remained in force. Enacted in February 1939, this law gave the labour exchanges (*Arbeitsämter*) the power to compel subjects of the Reich to perform work that was considered "particularly significant and urgent" in the context of the Four Year Plan and force companies to surrender their workers for the same purpose.[13] In practice, however, these powers were seldom brought to bear on (Aryan) Germans—on a large scale, only in the context of major programmes like the erection of the *Westwall* on the Franco-German border or the construction of the Hermann Göring Works in Braunschweig. Initially, the Allies used them conservatively as well. In the first months of the occupation, labour orders (*Arbeitsbefehle*) were primarily handed to former Nazis, who were forced to participate in rubble clearing and reconstruction work. All the while, though, problems were brewing in the mining sector that could hardly be resolved with punitive *Arbeitsbefehle*. In 1945, following the exodus of forced labourers, the Ruhr coal sector lacked approximately 80 000 miners. Simultaneously, there seemed to be a huge reservoir of manpower among the refugees and/or expellees who were entering the Western Zones in large numbers. It was against this backdrop that, in January 1946, the Allied Control Council ordered all working age people to register with and accept a job offer from the labour exchanges.[14] Even if the duty to work was re-branded as labour compulsion (Arbeitsverpflichtung), all Nazi era restrictions on free labour were kept in place. Most importantly, those who refused to accept a job stood to lose their ration cards and were thus faced with the prospect of acute destitution and starvation.

It must be stressed that both mobilisation civile and Arbeitsverpflichtung failed to achieve the desired increase in coal production. In the Hainaut, miners responded to the restriction on their freedoms with a weeks-long strike that forced the government into important concessions. It was only by turning to foreign labour—first German prisoners of war and later also Italian migrant workers—that Van Acker prevailed in his battle for coal.[15] In the Ruhr, the labour conscripts *en masse* voted against Arbeitsverpflichtung with their feet, with the majority of new recruits leaving the mines within a matter of days. The struggle against absenteeism would only be won when a "points system" was introduced in January 1947 that linked access to scarce consumer goods to completed shifts. If miners in both coal basins thus succeeded in defeating the assault on their freedoms at work, their resistance to labour conscription not only took different forms but was also framed in a wholly different language.

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[13] Andreas Kranig, *Lockung und Zwang: Zur Arbeitsverfassung im Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1983).

[14] This was laid down in Control Council Decree Number 3 of January 1946. See: Enactments and Approved Papers of the Control Council and Coordinating Committee. Allied Control Authority, Germany, 1945-Feb. 1946, Berlin 1946.

[15] Anne Morelli, "L'appel à la main d'oeuvre italienne pour les charbonnages et sa prise en charge à son arrivée en Belgique dans l'immédiat après-guerre," *Belgisch tijdschrift voor nieuwste geschiedenis/Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine* 19, no. 1–2 (1988): 83–130.

On Strike against Mobilisation Civile

One of the more striking aspects of the strike wave against the mobilisation civile was that it only broke out a few weeks after the measures were announced in mid-April 1945. That is of course not to argue that miners initially welcomed labour conscription. Toward the end of the month, reports from the pits were already warning of protest strikes against the restrictions of the right to freely choose and change jobs.[16] In fact, even the mention of the mobilisation civile seems to have had an inflammatory effect on miners. This was experienced first-hand by a state official who intervened in an unrelated strike (triggered by a pit-based conflict over production measurements) at the Anderlues pits on 2 May. In his efforts to broker a deal that would see a return to work, he "gently" reminded miner-delegates that strikes were not allowed under the mobilisation civile decrees. This elicited an angry response from the delegates, who responded in no uncertain terms that "they would be no more intimidated by Belgians than they had been by Germans during the occupation."[17]

The memory of the German occupation would be invoked time and again in protests against the mobilisation civile. From that perspective, it makes more sense that the beginning of the strike wave would coincide not so much with the coming into force of the decrees in mid-April as with the final Allied victory over Nazi Germany in early May, as the end of the war in Europe contributed to the strikes in more than one way. The return of political prisoners from German camps, with horror stories about their treatments at the hands of the Nazis, ushered in a febrile atmosphere both on the streets (with fresh retributions against former collaborators) and on the shop floor (with fresh demands for the expropriation of the coal barons). The cessation of hostilities also meant that those skilled miners who had taken up employment with the US Army, a group that the Belgian government had been unable to requisition for the duration of the war, faced a substantial loss of income as they were forced to return to the mines. Most importantly, there was a widespread feeling that the liberation of Europe should mean the end of wartime restrictions on individual freedoms—in short, that far-reaching measures might justifiable in the struggle against Nazi Germany, but had no place in a free Belgium and a free Europe.[18]

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[16] Report on miner demands in relation to mobilisation civile, 21 April 1945, AGR, Cabinets Affaires Économiques, 603.

[17] Report on strike at Anderlues pits and applicability of mobilisation civile decrees, 2 May 1945, AGR, Cabinets Affaires Économiques, 603.

The strikes against the mobilisation civile formally began on 7 May, after an ultimatum set by the communist Syndicats Uniques des Mineurs to withdraw the decrees (and meet a series of other bread-and-butter demands) ran out. After communist delegates voted for a general strike at a meeting in Quaregnon, a placard was affixed to pits across the Tournai region falsely claiming that the decision to call a general strike had been made jointly by the Syndicats Uniques and the socialist Miner's Confederation.[19] Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to see the strikes as merely a communist ploy. For that, the strike movement spread too quickly and too spontaneously across the Hainaut coal basin.

Over the following days, the strike wave paralyzed the Hainaut coal sector, setting in motion a process that would eventually overwhelm communist trade unionists just as much as their socialist and Catholic counterparts. In many ways, this had already been clear before the beginning of the strike wave. A report on the threat of a general strike dated 5 May noted how the movement was often "not led and commanded by pit delegates," who were faced with the prospect of being arrested if they fomented a strike, but who were "overtaken in their demands by the masses themselves."[20] As it was clearly unfeasible to arrest thousands of striking miners at once, the movement was nearly impossible to control. In fact, the strikes frequently appeared completely leaderless to police observers: "When miners arrive for work in the morning, they assemble around the tram exit and talk among themselves. There are no designated speakers. After brief discussions, someone says, 'we will not work' and the miners return home."[21]

At the outset, the strike wave offered communist trade unionists a great opportunity to strengthen their position among the miners. For even though the Belgian Communist Party was a member of the governmental coalition that had implemented mobilisation civile, the decrees very much bore Van Acker's signature. In countless leaflets and tracts spread across the basin, the Syndicats Uniques thus appealed to miner anger over the restrictions on their freedoms by attacking Van Acker and, by extension, the Miner's Confederation, for re-introducing Nazi methods. "Free labour," explained a leaflet published by the Syndicats Uniques in the Borinage region, "is rooted in the Belgian Constitution. It has always been respected by the governments that came and went since 1830 [when Belgium became an independent country—JG]. Only the fascism of totalitarian countries has destroyed this right, which belongs exclusively to the working class." With "methods from the other side of the Rhine," it went on, mobilisation civile "strangled" workers; not only by preventing them from "profiting from their professional qualifications and technical knowledge," but also by placing them "at the mercy of the bosses." The decrees, "adopted by representatives of the working class," were therefore "unjust and odious," representing "an insult to the sovereignty of labour so fiercely defended by the various trade unions in Belgium."[22]

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[18] A tract published by communist trade unionists in the Charleroi region at the height of the strike wave argued that the mobilisation civile had "lost its raison d'être, given that the war in Europe is over." Tract published by Regional Federation of the Syndicats Uniques des Mineurs in Charleroi, May 1945, Institut de Histoire Ouvrière, Économique et Sociale, Seraing (hereafter IHOES), Fonds Théo Dejace, 11 Syndicats 1945–46, 3 Mines 1945.

[19] Report on strikes in the coal mines of the Hainaut, 19 May 1945, AGR, Haut-Commissariat à la Sécurité de l'État, 1656.

[20] Report on situation at Maurage pits and threat of a general strike, 5 May 1945, AGR, Cabinets Affaires Économiques, 603.

[21] Report on strikes in the coal mines of the Hainaut, 19 May 1945, AGR, Haut-Commissariat à la Sécurité de l'État, 1656.

The backlash against the decrees was further fuelled by the dismissive attitude that socialist leaders initially took toward the strikes. During meetings with miner representatives in Mons and La Louviere on 11 May, socialist Minister of Labour and Social Security Léon-Éli Troclet lamented the "futile pretexts" of the strikes.[23] While his pleas for work to be resumed immediately were backed by speakers of the socialist and Catholic mining unions, the communist speakers defended the strikes; the meetings ended in acrimony. With reports that the strikes now threatened to spread to sectors that did not even fall under the mobilisation civile, socialist trade unionists changed tack. On 15 May, socialist and communist leaders of the newly-unified General Federation of Belgian Labour met with Van Acker personally to try and get the decrees off the table.[24] Their opening demand for the mobilisation civile to be suspended for a period of one month, during which miners were to demonstrate that production could also be increased without labour conscription, was rejected out of hand by the prime minister.[25] The only concession that Van Acker was willing to make was to allow miners to change jobs within the coal sector and across regions (i. e. between different pits). In return, however, trade unionists had to accept that the mobilisation civile and the concomitant strike ban would be extended to all sectors. They were also expected to interrupt all strikes until the Comité National Mixte des Mines (CNMM), the corporatist body that brought together state representatives, coal barons, and trade unionists in the mining sector, had taken a position on the various bread-and-butter demands that accompanied the strikes.

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[22] 'Pourquoi les mineurs font la grève?', May 1945, Rijksarchief Brugge, Archief Achille Van Acker, 641.

[23] Report on intervention of government members with miners, 11 May 1945, AGR, Cabinets Affaires Économiques, 603.

[24] On the cross-sectoral and national level, communist and socialist trade unions had merged in April 1945. Nevertheless, the fusion had not yet been carried through at the sectoral level, where communist and socialist trade unions still operated independently. The looming merger of Syndicats Uniques des Mineurs and the Miner's Confederation, and the struggle for leadership positions in the unified mining union, helps explain why the question of mobilisation civile was so fiercely contested between communist and socialist trade unionists.

[25] Protocol of meeting of National Committee of *Syndicats Uniques des Mineurs*, 19 May 1945, IHOES, Fonds Théo Dejace, 11 Syndicats 1945–46, 3 Mines 1945.

This compromise was celebrated as a major victory for freedom by the Miner's Confederation. "We have achieved that miners can change jobs within the mining sector, thereby safeguarding their freedom", exulted a pamphlet of the Miner's Confederation in the Borinage region. Yet, it divided elites and grassroots within the Syndicats Uniques.[26] The resolution that national communist trade union leaders put before their regional branches—promising an eight-day interruption of the strikes to allow the CNMM to meet on 22 May, but threatening to resume the strikes for 48 hours per week (i. e., to strike for two working days each week) if miner demands were not met—attracted much criticism from regional delegates. The implicit acceptance of mobilisation civile (since this fell outside of the CNMM's competencies) was alluded to by the delegate for the Basse-Sambre region, who declared that "we are free men in a free country" and that he would vote against the resolution. The delegate for the Borinage made clear that miners in his region would not accept these marching orders: "the situation is such that it is impossible to retreat."[27]

Even if the resolution was eventually adopted by a majority, it proved difficult to implement on the ground. A situational report of 22 May noted that, of the three regions that made up the Hainaut coal basin, there had only been a general resumption of work in Charleroi. Out of the 20 pits in the Centre region, only eight had voted to resume work, with a further nine wanting to wait until after the CNMM had met. In the Borinage region, miners had rejected the resolution altogether and decided to continue the strike. In each of the regions, the report went on, the abolition of mobilisation civile remained the "principal focus" of miner demands, suggesting that the olive branch offered by Van Acker and accepted by trade union leaders had failed to dent miner resistance to the restriction of their freedoms. What was worse for the Syndicats Uniques was that miners were refusing to pay their membership dues, which was attributed not only to a recent increase of the contribution, but also to "miner dissatisfaction with the S. U."[28]

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[26] As a pamphlet of the Miner's Confederation in the Borinage region claimed: "We have achieved that miners can change jobs within the mining sector, thereby safeguarding their freedom." See: 'Aux mineurs, À la population', May 1945, IHOES, Fonds Théo Dejace, 11 Syndicats 1945–46, 3 Mines 1945.

[27] Protocol of meeting of National Committee of *Syndicats Uniques des Mineurs*, 19 May 1945, IHOES, Fonds Théo Dejace, 11 Syndicats 1945–46, 3 Mines 1945.

[28] 'Situation des Mineurs', 22 May 1945, IHOES, Fonds Théo Dejace, 11 Syndicats 1945–46, 3 Mines 1945.

When the CNMM failed to meet the demands of the Syndicats Uniques, the movement had already lost much of its momentum. At a meeting of its regional leaders, many speakers vented their frustration over the reprieve that had been handed to the government. They made it clear that miners were opposed to the scheme to strike for 48 hours per week and had wanted to remain on strike until all of their demands were met. Now that work had resumed in many pits, however, it would be very difficult to set the strike in motion once more. Even in the Borinage, which had been at the forefront of the struggle, miners had gone back to work on 23 May, since they had "understood that their strike had become pointless, as it was isolated and abandoned by all trade union organizations."[29] To save it from embarrassment, the national leadership of the Syndicats Uniques tried to call a referendum, which gave miners four options to continue the struggle: actions outside of working hours, a 24-hour general strike, to strike for one day every week, or a non-stop strike. Yet the referendum, which was disavowed by the socialist and Catholic mining unions and did not resonate with miners, never got off the ground. By late May, calm had been restored in the Hainaut coal mines.

What remained was much anger. In a pamphlet of the Syndicats Uniques in the Centre, Van Acker was virulently attacked. His mobilisation civile recalled "fascist methods" in "handing workers, hands and feet tied, to their exploiters." Miners had shown restraint by suspending the strikes to allow their trade union representatives to defend their interests before the CNMM. But "neither the government nor collaborator bosses [*patrons Kollaborateurs*] wanted to do justice to miner demands." After the government ministers who had participated in the CNMM "resolutely took the side of the exploiters," a worker delegation was dispatched to Van Acker. He "wanted to hear nothing of it" either: "Here are the words of that aspiring dictator: 'The strikes must end, and I will make them end.'" The prime minister "had better reconsider," warned the pamphlet, "as workers will remember and will not let themselves be fascistized [*fascistiser*] by anyone, not even by a former worker like Mr. Van Acker." For "miners want to live and work as free men. Why else […] were millions of lives sacrificed? Was that sacrifice a ploy?"[30]

Even though Van Acker managed to defeat the strike wave in the short term, the mobilisation civile failed on its own terms. It did not contribute to winning the "battle for coal," which was only achieved by tapping into new veins of manpower. It did not deter further strikes in the mines, which broke out with fresh vigour when King Leopold III expressed his intention to return to Belgium in mid-June.[31] Most importantly, it did lethal damage to Van Acker's efforts to restore the mining profession to its former glory, since forcing miners to stay in their jobs hardly enticed new recruits to the pits. Small wonder, then, that absenteeism remained high, morale low, and output per worker kept dropping into 1946; as reports to the Prime Minister made clear, "far from being an elite occupation, the mines had tended to become a refuge for the marginal elements of society."[32]

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[29] Protocol of meeting of National Committee of *Syndicats Uniques des Mineurs*, 24 May 1945, IHOES, Fonds Théo Dejace, 11 Syndicats 1945–46, 3 Mines 1945

[30] 'À la Population, À tous les Travailleurs', May 1945, IHOES, Fonds Théo Dejace, 11 Syndicats 1945–46, 3 Mines 1945.

Arbeitsverpflichtung and Absenteeism

The amelioration and rejuvenation of the mining profession was also a key concern for German elites. Even during the war years, when a steady supply of forced labourers propped up the Ruhr coal mines, functionaries remained occupied with solving recruitment issues. A report, drawn up by an overseer at the Rheinelbe pits in Gelsenkirchen in 1941, warned that the challenges facing the Ruhr coal sector could not be solved by (forced) foreign labour alone. To win over German recruits, it was imperative that miners receive better wages, as "we cannot normalize poverty." This would also require improving the health and safety situation underground, for "many miners are not sending their sons to the pits because of [the risk of] silicosis [an occupational lung disease]."[33]

The exodus of forced labourers in the wake of the liberation rendered this problem acute and helps explain why some trade union leaders were initially willing to go along with or facilitate the Arbeitsverpflichtung. When the labour conscription decree was issued by the Allies in January 1946, there was no reaction whatsoever either from trade unionists or indeed from the miners themselves. While the leaders of the Mining Union (Industrieverband Bergbau, IVB) later declared that they had opposed the decree all along, it was only when the mass arrival of newcomers started to make itself felt on their rank and file in the works councils and on the shop floor that they spoke up.

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[31] Having clashed with the Belgian government over who had the supreme command over the army in the wake of the Nazi invasion of 1940, King Leopold refused to be evacuated with the government and surrendered to Germany on 28 May. He was initially made a prisoner of war at his palace in Brussels but met with Hitler in November. After the D-Day invasions, he was shipped off to the Reich and was liberated by the US Army near Salzburg in May 1945. His plans to return to Belgium the following month evoked a strong reaction especially in Wallonia, which had suffered more under the occupation than Flanders and where the King was widely seen as a traitor. See on this theme, Jan Velaers and Herman van Goethem, *Leopold III: de koning, het land, de oorlog* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2001), 912–945.

[32] Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium*, 266.

[33] Report on recruitment problems in coal sector, 1941, Bergbau-Archiv Bochum, BBA 41/779.

The integration of thousands of "untrained" (*berufsfremde*) workers, who were not there out of their own free will, presented insurmountable problems. The bulk of the forced recruits either never made it to the pits, managing to slip away *en route* to the Ruhr, or escaped within days of starting their new jobs, often taking valuable work clothing and equipment with them. As a result, there was a massive turnover among the labour conscripts: out of the 60 000 workers who had been dispatched to the coal basins, only 18 000 remained by late March.[34] Works councillors, who were responsible for the integration of the newcomers at pit level, complained bitterly about both the overly rosy prospects of life as a coal miner proffered by the labour exchanges and the brazen attitudes that the young recruits took toward their superiors. Worse, the labour conscripts generally showed "little desire and determination to fully commit themselves to their job,"[35] which not only impacted their own productivity, but also negatively affected the labour morale of the permanent workforce.

As it became increasingly clear that the Arbeitsverpflichtung could not deliver the longed-for increase in coal production, trade unionists grew more vocal in their opposition to the scheme. Yet, their criticism of labour conscription was framed around existing demands for higher wages and better housing rather than around universal workers' rights and freedoms. The leader of the Oberhausen branch of the IVB complained bitterly that trade unionists had done all they could "to make life a little more pleasant" for the new recruits by organizing theatre and cinema showings, hosting musical performances, and providing radios and newspapers in their accommodations. That 80 per cent of them had nonetheless left the Ruhr, he went on, was due to their malnourishment, poor wages, and inadequate housing.[36] The living conditions of the labour conscripts were "unbearable. We have often seen that these workers do not earn enough to cover social security contributions, rent, canteen catering, and the cost of their work clothing. That is, they still owe their employer money at the end of the month." The housing situation was also terrible, "as they have to live in the barracks in which prisoners of war used to be held." What made this all the more poignant was that quite a few of the conscripts were returning prisoners of war themselves.[37]

Even though the conditions under which the labour conscripts were forced to work not only elaborated upon Nazi-era restrictions on free labour but even mimicked the(ir) wartime experience of captivity, worker protests against the Arbeitsverpflichtung did not invoke the notion of freedom. This became very clear in mid-1946, when the military government, in a desperate attempt to stop the exodus of the new recruits, published the punishments (up to four months in prison) that the labour courts had recently handed to workers for "idling" (*Bummelei*). While these rulings caused "great dissatisfaction and distrust vis-à-vis the military government among miners," this was not because of their violation of the freedom to change (or quit) jobs. Rather, miners felt that "these punishments were issued with a view to increase coal production," which would be impossible to achieve under the dire food situation and without adequate technical gear.[38]

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[34] Roseman, *Recasting the Ruhr*, 28–34.

[35] Report on the situation in the Ruhr coal sector, December 1946, Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Abteilung Westfalen, Münster, 7579.

[36] Radio report on Arbeitsverpflichtung in the coal sector, 16 August 1946, Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Abteilung Rheinland, Duisburg (hereafter LAV-NRW R), RW 202 Nr. 40, fo. 18.

[37] Situational report on miners in the Ruhr, 1946, LAV-NRW R, RW 202 Nr. 40, fo. 22.

Insofar as freedom was referenced at all by contemporaries, it was almost exclusively through the prism of expediency. German elites tended to argue that free labour was preferable to labour conscription not so much on grounds of principle, but simply because it delivered better results. In discussions on the limited success of the Arbeitsverpflichtung with British military governors, IVB First Secretary August Schmidt explained that Germans were "free labourers, who are not familiar with coercion in this respect." Yet, rather than reclaiming full freedoms for his rank and file, he went on to suggest that the forced recruits be given the opportunity to sign a declaration as to whether they wanted to stay in the mines after completing one month of labour conscription.[39] Similarly, the former president of the Westphalian labour exchange and incumbent (social democratic) minister of labour in the North Rhine-Westphalian government, August Halbfell, declared that "conscription in the mines has proven itself worse than voluntary labour." For "where there are too few people, even conscription cannot produce more."[40]

At the same time, certain trade unionists were in favour of keeping and even extending the Arbeitsverpflichtung in their quest to revitalize the coal sector. A late 1946 position paper of the Dortmund branch of the IVB argued that the current measures would not solve the recruitment problems of the Ruhr mines. Most of the young conscripts could only be deployed as apprentices (*Hilfskräfte*) to hewers, and the ratio between apprentices and hewers was already completely out of balance. Of course, these youngsters could be trained into skilled hewers, but these efforts were complicated by the fact that the Arbeitsverpflichtung in the pits was limited to one year (or 300 shifts). Although the paper spoke out against a universal Arbeitsverpflichtung, it recommended to "continue to an increased degree the conscription of individual workers, from whom a proper miner performance [*bergmännische Leistung*] could be expected in the foreseeable future." Their conscription, moreover, was to be extended to 18 months (or 450 shifts).[41]

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[38] Police report on situation in Gelsenkirchen, 12 July 1946, Institut für Stadtgeschichte Gelsenkirchen, GE 39–423; Chronik der Stadt Gelsenkirchen, 1946, p. 137.

[39] Archiv für soziale Bewegungen, Bochum, Archiv Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau und Energie, Signatur 19247.

[40] "Die Ruhr antwortet dem Weltgewerkschaftsbund," *Rhein-Ruhr Zeitung*, 17 January 1947.

It was only when it became convenient from a political perspective to invoke free labour that German elites changed their tune. A first opportunity to do so emerged in January 1947, when the communist-led World Federation of Trade Unions adopted a resolution stipulating that forced labour had to be maintained in the Ruhr mines so as to provide the world with coal. By that time, the military government had mostly abandoned the Arbeitsverpflichtung (even though the decree remained in place) in favour of the points system,[42] meaning that trade unionists were on safer ground in their condemnation of the resolution. In doing so, they for the first time used the more ideologically charged rhetoric familiar from the campaign against the mobilisation civile. According to Heinrich Peterburs, a provincial politician for the German Centre Party as well as a coal miner and works council member at the Essen-Rosenweg pits, the resolution "made it crystal clear to the German worker that it will be left to him alone, without international help, to become the master of his own fate once more." In fact, he suggested that German workers would draw their inspiration from the struggles of (European) workers under Nazi rule to show that they were not "the disenfranchised workers of a defeated people." For "we will be able to defend ourselves against those methods, for the abolition of which workers in other countries have also shed their blood."[43] Speaking to a General Assembly of the Mining Union, IVB Secretary Heinrich Gutermuth was blunter about the attack on free labour entailed in the resolution. The only thing that could be said about the resolution, he scolded, was that it "is nothing short of an earlier demand by [Heinrich] Himmler, who also gave the order to enslave [*zwangsverschleppen*] foreign workers."[44]

These attacks had the desired effect insofar as they forced the communist delegation of the World Federation of Trade Unions in Berlin to issue a hurried clarification explaining that the resolution had merely been "a proposal" and that no decisions on the subject would be taken without consulting German trade unionists first.[45] Over the next couple of years, West German trade unionists labour would increasingly use controversies over labour conscription as a stick to beat the communists with—their own role in facilitating the Arbeitsverpflichtung becoming a distant and distorted memory. A late 1948 article on labour conscripts fleeing the Soviet Zone in a Bavarian trade union journal shows this very clearly: After addressing the horrors told by miners who had escaped Communist rule in East Germany, it went on to sketch the situation in the Western zones of occupation. It insisted that the free choice of employment constituted a "basic demand" of the labour movement in the West, which was "jealously guarded" by the trade unions. All exemptions to this principle that were born out of necessity, it went on, had to subjected to strict oversight, as these could quickly descend into forced labour. The article then outlined which exemptions still existed under Control Council Decree No. 3 before concluding, in a complete misrepresentation of the labour conscription programme that had run for a year in the postwar Ruhr, that "the labour exchanges in the Western zones have used the powers at their disposal only rarely (against black marketeers)."[46]

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[41] Position paper of the IVB Dortmund on Arbeitsverpflichtung, 15 November 1946, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie, Bonn (hereafter AdsD), Archiv des Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbundes, Bestand Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (Britische Zone), 5/DGA000449, fo. 210.

[42] Transcript of interview with Henry Collins (the post-war director of North German Coal Control) on Nordwestdeutsche Rundfunk, 27 February 1950, BBA 16/1651.

[43] Quoted in: "Punktsystem im Ruhrbergbau eingeführt," *Neue Westfälische Kurier,* 14 January 1947.

[44] General Assembly of the Mining Union at the Emscher-Lippe pits, 19 January 1947, BBA 35/234.

[45] Declaration of delegation of World Federation of Trade Unions in Germany, January 1947, AdsD, Archiv des Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbundes, Bestand Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (Britische Zone), 5/DGA000074, fo. 46.

Freedom versus Duty

How can the differences between the bitterly-fought and vociferous struggles against the mobilisation civile and the much more low-key and informal resistance to the Arbeitsverpflichtung be explained? The obvious answer lies in the very different situations in which Belgium and Germany found themselves in the immediate aftermath of the war. The former was a sovereign nation that had just regained its freedom, which made the re-introduction of wartime restrictions on free labour all the more incomprehensible to the miners. The latter was a defeated and occupied country, which not only allowed the military government to lay down the law (or, in this case, to retain Nazi-era legislation), but also limited the room for manoeuvre for miners and trade unionists to oppose labour conscription with traditional means of industrial action.

Nevertheless, this article has demonstrated that there was more to the divergence between Belgium and Germany than their distinct political constellations at the moment of liberation. For the different responses to labour conscription had much deeper roots in the national histories of the two countries. The protest movement against mobilisation civile invoked freedoms that had been enshrined in the Belgian Constitution since the 1830s. This was part of a wider "rediscovery" of that Constitution "as a charter of Belgian traditions of self-government" in the wake of the war.[47] The claim was that freedoms were a central plank of Belgian identity, which had only ever been taken away under foreign oppression and which was to be observed by any democratic Belgian government. Absent such an unbroken tradition of democratic freedoms, the German response to Arbeitsverpflichtung drew its inspiration from more recent experiences. The legacy of Nazi-era ideas surrounding "duty consciousness" (*Pflichtbewußtsein*)[48] seems to have served as a frame of reference not only for trade unionists, but also for the miners themselves, leading to little opposition to labour conscription on principle, but increased exit when rulers failed to keep their side of the bargain.[49]

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[46] "Der flüchtende Bergarbeiter," *Gewerkschaftszeitung*, November 1948.

[47] Martin Conway, *Western Europe's Democratic Age: 1945–1968* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 103–104.

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[48] This had been among the key concepts targeted at the 'Hitler Youth generation', which was to provide the bulk of the labour conscripts in the post-war Ruhr coal mines. See: Alexander von Plato, "The Hitler Youth Generation and Its Role in the Two Postwar German States," in *Generations in Conflict: Youth Revolt and Generation Formation in Germany, 1770–1968*, ed. Mark Roseman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 210–226.

[49] This seems to have been true for both German states. In her work on labour conscription in the uranium mines of the Erzgebirge, Caitlin E. Murdock recounts the story of a conscript who had completed six months (the period for which workers were initially conscripted) of labour in Aue "so that no one could accuse me of wrongdoing." When management insisted that he sign up for another year and withheld his ration card when he refused, he invoked his right to "seek freedom" and departed without permission or his ration card. Caitlin E. Murdock, "A Gulag in the Erzgebirge? Forced Labor, Political Legitimacy, and Eastern German Uranium Mining in the Early Cold War, 1946–1949," *Central European History* 47 (2014): 805.