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"Coal, War, and Peace in Twentieth-Century Europe"

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Forced laborers in a Ruhr District coal mine.

Courtesy of Montanhistorisches Dokumentationszentrum (montan.dok) at the Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum/Bergbau-Archiv (BBA) 108/747.

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Oil is sexy. Coal, on the other hand, is boring. When we think of oil, we think of wars and military coups, dubious secret services, international corporations, global supply routes, inestimable

wealth, and millionaires like the Rockefellers. Oil captures imaginations. Coal does not. No wars have been fought over coal and no fascinating industry leaders or giant corporations have been spawned by it. Coal conjures up dangerous work, not wealth. We associate it with ash and smoke and dirt. In a nutshell, it is unpleasant and dull.

These perceptions are not wrong, but they do not reveal the true significance of either of these raw materials. For a long time, coal was the most crucial energy source in the world, especially in Europe, and it was not until the 1950s that oil gained the upper hand. Hydropower played a role too, albeit a limited one. However, for more than a century there was practically no alternative to coal. Without it, European industrialization would not have happened, or would have proceeded at a much slower pace. It impacted both world wars and the ensuing peace efforts. In this and many other areas, it played a decisive role that later faded into obscurity, but which its contemporaries were only too aware of. (From the article)

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