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COAL, WAR, AND PEACE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY EUROPE

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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.



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. Used by permission.

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.

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One of these was Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution. In spring 1920, the Soviet Union was in the throes of civil war. The new state's troops were fighting for survival. Nevertheless, Lenin found time to attend the inaugural congress of the Russian mineworkers' union, as he needed its help to obtain urgent supplies. In his view, coal was the veritable "bread" of industry. Without it, factories and plants would not exist, and large-scale industry would collapse—it was needed to save the Soviet Union.¹

Coal was particularly scarce in the USSR and yet its central importance had been proven throughout Europe during the two world wars. It supplied the energy required to produce weapons and munitions; it facilitated the mobilization of millions of soldiers and provided reinforcements. Twentieth-century industrial warfare could not have taken place without it, and when the wars ended, it played an equally important role in rebuilding destroyed countries. Ultimately, lasting peace could only be attained if coal deposits were not used to wage more wars. In times of war and peace, coal—as the experience in Europe has shown—was of decisive importance.²

War

Coal's predominance in Europe was already evident before the two world wars. Hard coal supplied energy that powered steam engines, railways, and ships; it heated apartments, factories, and public buildings, and produced electricity and gas. As a raw material, it was also the cornerstone of the chemical industry, where it was used to manufacture dyes, gases, fertilizers, and countless other substances needed in peacetime, and even more so in wartime. In Germany, this was especially true for ammunition production. Chilean saltpeter, a necessary component of ammunition, became unavailable due to a sea blockade by British ships that prevented its delivery to Germany. Ammunition shortages were imminent, but especially at the beginning of the war, this was resolved by substituting saltpeter with ammonia, a by-product of coke processing.

The blockade experience, scientific curiosity on the part of chemists, and economic interests after the First World War intensified efforts to obtain more coal-based products. These included substitutes for petroleum, rubber, and fats—items that would have been urgently needed had war broken out again. Numerous countries made attempts at fabricating such products, but due to the high costs involved, these experiments did not go far. This was also the case in Germany. However, because the blockades of the First World War had led to massive shortages and even famine, Germany gave a much higher priority to the search for substitutes for imported products. After 1933, expenses barely played a role. The National Socialists were preparing to wage war and determined to avoid the consequences of a blockade at any cost this time. They also wanted to become as economically self-sufficient as possible. This led to the creation of huge plants that produced substitute coal-based products—including even margarine, though it did not taste very good. Much more important were soaps, fats, oils, rubber for tires, and above all kerosene, crafted predominantly from coal. German armaments minister Albert Speer was not exaggerating when he stated in 1944 that "coal is the starting point for everything necessary in war."³



Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-2008-0072
Foto: o. Ang. | 1914/1918

A colliery near Lens, France, destroyed by fire during the Battle of Aisne. 2738 BUFA. Bundesarchiv, image 146-2008-0072. CC-BY-SA 3.0.

To extract the enormous quantities required, European collieries employed almost 2.5 million miners in 1914 and only slightly fewer in 1939. At first it was difficult to find workers. High wages attracted migrants from agricultural areas that offered few alternatives. However, the job's arduous and dangerous nature led to high fluctuations in worker numbers. In addition, during the two world wars, both the military and the coal mining industry needed young, strong men, who were in short supply. To remedy the situation, the number of adolescent and older workers rose. There were even suggestions that women might also be required, but such proposals were met with enormous resistance. So male volunteers were sought, either among the national population, among allies, or in occupied areas.

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Foreign coalminers gained great importance, especially in Germany, in the First and then especially in the Second World War. But few came voluntarily. These workers, many of whom were from Eastern Europe, were enticed by financial promises, but many were also forced to work, along with countless prisoners of war. During the Second World War, approximately 13.5 million foreign men, women, and even minors worked for the German Reich, the vast majority as forced laborers. The first Russian prisoners of war who came to the Ruhr District coal mines were so debilitated by their time spent in captivity that they first had to be restored to health in camps before they could work. From then on, they were subject to constant persecution. Arbitrary punishments were continually doled out and provisions were barely sufficient to ensure the prisoners' survival. Those who were too weak to work often had to remain underground until targets were met. Forced labor was indispensable and accounted for 30 to 40 percent of the mining population in the Ruhr District at the end of the war.⁴

Peace

Coal retained its eminent importance in the ensuing peacetime not least because it was needed to rebuild destroyed areas. The rich deposits in Germany played a significant role, although this also stirred the fear that they might be used again to wage war. Lasting peace in Europe was only possible if a solution to this problem could be found—as the Versailles peace talks showed.

During the First World War, enormous damage had been caused to the coal mines in Belgium and France, not least by German troops who left a trail of destruction in their wake. Representatives of the French government sent delegates to the devastated areas and demanded compensation. This was all the more important because almost no military operations had taken place on German soil. Germany's economy remained intact and was capable of quickly launching another threat. To prevent this, the French government wanted to impose control over the heavy industry of the Ruhr District and its coal deposits; but it was unsuccessful. Instead, France received reparations, including extensive coal deliveries, and the territory of Saarland, whose coal deposits were comparatively small and of inferior quality. Germany also lost its coal mines in Upper Silesia and was weakened—but not to an extent sufficient to prevent the National Socialists' rearmament a few years later.⁵

Miners had high hopes in 1918. Since industrialization, they had suffered under the hardline attitude of colliery owners. Time and again, they had gone on strike for higher pay and safer working conditions but with little success. During the war, they had had to make huge sacrifices to satisfy the need for coal, and finally, their demands were being met with sympathy from governments, the military, and authorities. They were hopeful that they would be compensated at the end of the war and that their circumstances would improve. After the war, numerous strikes broke out, which were particularly bitter in Germany, where miners called for the socialization of the Ruhr mining industry. At the same time, their British counterparts demanded the nationalization of coal mining and wanted to realize this through a general strike, together with other trade unions. But these attempts failed. Even the workers' hopes of having more say largely went unheard. The colliery owners wielded too much power.⁶

In the Second World War, the rapid success of German troops led to the majority of European coal mines being placed under Hitler's power. Once again, the state authorities, and now also the occupying troops, intervened to achieve the highest level of output, but this time mostly in favor of the colliery owners. Great Britain was an exception: democratic conditions prevailed, and miners were able to establish better working conditions even during the war. However, these workers were not satisfied. They wanted to push through the demands they had fought for in vain after the First World War. This sense of dissatisfaction was also felt in other countries. Everywhere miners drew the same conclusion from their experiences: the disappointments they had lived through after 1918 should not be repeated.



(Left) French poster with the message “Miner! The fate of France is in your hands.” © Ministère de la Transition écologique. All rights reserved. Source: [DREAL Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes](#). (Right) German poster asking miners to work on Sundays and national holidays to support the ongoing war. Courtesy of [Montanhistorisches Dokumentationszentrum](#) (montan.dok) at the Deutschen Bergbau-Museum Bochum/Bergbau-Archiv (BBA) P 41.

This time, their efforts were successful. In France and Great Britain, mining became a nationalized industry. In West Germany, miners demanded the same. But there, nationalizing collieries would have created a huge and extremely powerful corporation—controlled by Germans. After their experience of the two world wars, Western allies were not prepared to allow this to happen. Instead, West German trade unions achieved an equal footing for workers and colliery owners, which significantly reduced the latter’s influence. In the territories of the Soviet Union, a socialist planned economy prevailed. The result was as clear as it was surprising: the unassailable capitalist mining industry, which had led to considerable conflicts since industrialization and had poisoned the domestic policies of many states, no longer existed, or did so only in a controlled form.⁷

Yet this did not mean that the warmongering potential of German coal deposits was under control. The peace settlements of Versailles had clearly not succeeded. After the Second World War, there was no immediate danger: the destruction in Germany was too great. However, there was concern that the country might soon recover and once again build the industrial capacity for war. To prevent this, various proposals started to circulate. The most radical consisted in devolving industry and turning Germany into an agricultural nation. Another was to permanently subordinate the Ruhr District to the major Western powers and thus control its capacity. Alternatively, it was suggested that France build a similarly efficient heavy industry; for this, however, it did not have the necessary raw materials, nor the required labor force.

The solution came in the form of a very different proposal. France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Italy agreed to place their coal and steel industries under common control, together with West Germany. This was a remarkable compromise, in which France and the other partners refrained from gaining direct access to Germany's heavy industry. German colliery owners, in contrast, realized how important their role was in the reconstruction of Europe and the Cold War, and hoped to regain their former status. After the experiences of the two world wars, however, there could be no question of this. The suspicion that their power would once again be abused was too large. The result was the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which these countries formed in 1951 to secure joint control of these two industries.⁸

There were many reasons for this willingness to compromise, including the negative experiences with the Treaty of Versailles, the emerging Cold War, and the desire to strengthen democratic forces in the young West German republic. In addition, coal was crucial—steel was too. Without them, the participating countries would not have been able to guarantee their reconstruction and a compromise was unavoidable. So, it is no coincidence that the first major European contract after the horrors of the Second World War was drawn up to cover the “boring” topic of coal. And more than that, the ECSC was so successful that it became the forerunner of the European Economic Union, which the same states founded in Rome in 1957.

Coal may be dirty, and it might not capture our imaginations. But it is not boring and it is certainly not insignificant. Quite the opposite: since industrialization, it has been omnipresent in European history. Sometimes it was little more than a sketch, and it often played a supporting role. But it returned to center stage again and again. In both world wars, coal provided the material basis for the atrocities committed and was of decisive importance in the subsequent search for lasting peace.

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When the ECSC was established, coal seemed to be at the height of its economic and political importance. But in fact, it was already in decline, a development that became clear and gathered speed by the end of the 1950s. Mines were closed increasingly frequently, and the victory march of oil and gas could no longer be halted. It therefore seems ironic that coal made its greatest and most positive contribution at a time when its power had feet of clay.

Luckily, those living in that era had a different impression. The significance of coal was still considered so great that key decision makers agreed to compromises that might otherwise not have been possible. At least in this case, coal managed to capture imaginations—with a positive outcome.

Notes

1. Vladimir Ilyitch Lenin, *Collected Works: 4th English Edition*, vol. 30 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 495–501.
2. For a detailed discussion of this article's arguments, which includes an overview of the current research, literature, and evidence for the figures cited, see Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, *Grubengold. Das Zeitalter der Kohle von 1750 bis Heute* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2018).

3. Evelyn Kroker, ed., *"Wer zahlt die Zeche?" Plakate und Flugblätter aus dem Bergbau-Archiv Bochum* (Bochum: Deutsches Bergbau-Museum, 1995), 48.
4. Hans-Christoph Seidel and Klaus Tenfelde, eds., *Zwangsarbeit im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts. Bewältigung und vergleichende Aspekte* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2007); Hans-Christoph Seidel, *Der Ruhrbergbau im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Zechen - Bergarbeiter - Zwangsarbeiter* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2010).
5. Yves Le Maner, *La Grande Guerre dans le Nord et le Pas-de-Calais 1914-1918* (Lille: La Voix du Nord, 2014); Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Horst Steffens, *Lohn der Mühen: Geschichte der Bergarbeiter an der Saar* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 1989); Diana Cooper-Richet, *Le peuple de la nuit; mines et mineurs en France (XIXe - XXe siècle)* (Paris: Perrin, 2002).
6. Barry Supple, *The History of the British Coal Industry, Vol. 4: 1913-1946: The Political Economy of Decline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
7. Cooper-Richet, *Peuple*; Supple, *History*; Darryl Holter, *The Battle for Coal, Miners and the Politics of Nationalization in France, 1940-1950* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992).
8. Martin Dedman, *The Origins and Development of the European Union* (London: Routledge, 2010); Marie-Thérèse Bitsch, *Histoire de la construction européenne* (Paris: Edition Complexe, 2008); Ludolf Herbst, *Option für den Westen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989).



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