Migration and ethnicity in coal field history (worldwide)

A global industry

Between Spitsbergen (Svalbard) Islands (Norway) in the far north,¹ South Island (New Zealand) in the far south,² Vancouver Island (Canada) in the far west,³ and Hoikkaidō Island (Japan) in the far east,⁴ coal mining has been (and to a certain extent still is) a truly global industry. Being place-bound by geology, often originating in isolated places, and always labour intensive, coal mining was dependent on migrant labour in almost every district.⁵ At the start, experienced miners were often recruited from other districts; inexperienced workers came from the surrounding countryside, and soon also from more distant places, regions and countries. Cross-border migratory labour connected coalfields, regions and countries, and mobilised new groups of workers of a variety of national and ethnic descent. Therefore, the history of labour in the coalfields is not only a global, but often a transnational history as well.

Mobilisation of ethnic minorities

Ethnic (minority) groups were also mobilised from within national states and empires, however, like in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Flemish workers to the Walloon coalfields in Belgium, Irish to Scotland in the UK (before Irish independence), Poles to the Ruhr area in the German empire (before Polish independence), African-Americans from the south to Virginia and Alabama in the US, migrants from the French colonies in the Maghreb (Algeria and Morocco) to France, and Koreans to the Hoikkaidō and Chikuho coalfields in Japan (Korea then being a part of the Japanese empire). It is certainly no coincidence that at that time these ethnic minorities were all considered and treated as people of a lower status.

³ John Douglas Belshaw, Colonization and community: The Vancouver Island coalfield and the making of the British Columbian working class (Montreal 2002).
than the dominant ethnic groups in these countries. Their mobilisation as miners reflected the low status of work in the mines, and also the position of immigrants as secondary workers within the mines. This is perhaps less clear in the cases of English migrants to South-Wales and Russian migrants to the Ukraine (Donetsk) coal basins, but many of these still were of the lowest grade within their ethnic groups.

Global labour history

These salient features of mining labour have generated a lot of research, especially in labour history. In this research the common saying that ‘everybody was black down there’ has been increasingly provided with a question mark. In his overview on coal mining in global labour history in the volume Global Labour History. A State of the Art, Ian Phimister contended that ‘histories of coal mining communities and workers’ struggles have tended to cluster in recent years [...] around ethnicity and culture’. While, according to Phimister, ‘this had never been a major concern of mainstream British mining historiography’, these issues have continued to attract historical investigation in Germany, especially with respect to ‘the relationship between Polish-speaking labour migrants and German miners’ unions in the Ruhr coalfields’. Without further ado, he then jumps to American labour historiography, where they ‘have, of course, remained a key area of debate’.

Since Herbert Gutman wrote on the black coal miner and the United Mine Workers of America in 1968, a debate has been going on in American labour history about ‘ interracial solidarity and unionism’, evolving from a ‘class over race’ perspective to the conclusion that there was a ‘complex intertwining’ of ‘race and class consciousness’ and that ‘the racial policies of organized labour were far from monolithic’. Phimister then proceeds to parallel research on the tense relationship between ‘the historical construction of class solidarity’

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6 Russians were by far the largest group of migrants in the Ukrain Donetsk basin, see: ibidem, 288-291.
and ‘the politics of ethnic identity’ in such diverse countries as India (Chota Nagpur), Indonesia (Ombilin, West-Sumatra), Australia (Blair Athol), South-Africa (Hlobane Colliery, Natal), and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe (Wankie Colliery, his own research).

While in the research mentioned by Phimister many comparative insights can be gained on the issues of class (solidarity), race (discrimination), and ethnicity (ethnic identity) in a number of mining districts, foremost in the American and the (former) British imperial world, his overview is far from complete, both on the variety of issues raised in research on migration and ethnicity in coalfield history and in the geographical scope of this kind of research in different parts of the world. This becomes clear, among others, in the volume edited in 2005 by Stefan Berger, Norry LaPorte, and Andy Croll, *Towards A Comparative History Of Coalfield Societies*, which contained several (comparative) studies on migration and ethnicity, reflecting ‘coalfield experiences across all five continents’, in, among others, the United States, South-Africa, Germany, Japan, Britain, and Belgium.

In the United States and the (former) British Empire, where Phimister seems most at ease, more research has been done than he mentions, and ‘even’ in Britain, already in 1979, the impact of Irish immigration on the development of trade unionism in the Scottish

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12 Referring to: Diane Menghetti, *Blair Athol: The Life and Death of a Town* (Clermont Qld 1995).
coalfields of Lanarkshire had been a major concern in the work of Alan Campbell, contradicting Phimister’s assertion cited above, and it has remained so ever since. Outside the English-speaking world there are studies available on Japan, China, Turkey, and the Mexican-Texan borderland.

**European research**

In Europe, there has been a wealth of research on issues of migration and ethnicity of several migrant groups in coal mining, many of these, indeed, with regard to Polish mineworkers, also in a comparative perspective, both in Germany and France, and to a lesser extent in Belgium, the Netherlands, and even in Britain. In Germany there has been a lively discussion on the similarities and differences of Polish immigration in the more

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21 Donald Quataert, *Miners and the State in the Ottoman Empire. The Zonguldak Coalfield 1822-1920* (New York/Oxford 2006)
25 Beyers, Iedereen zwarte.
distant and Turkish migration in the recent past, but historically a comparison with Korean migration in the Japanese coalfields might be more fruitful. As Donald Smith, concluded in the volume *Towards a comparative history of coalfield societies*, cited above:

Comparative studies of groups such as Koreans in Chikuho [Japan], African-Americans in Appalachia, and Poles in the Ruhr, could do much to sharpen our understanding of the relative importance of structural factors and local economic and political conditions in shaping the discrimination minority-groups faced on the job, in housing and from majority-group workers.

Other migrant groups in European coal mining, both from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean countries, have attracted attention as well, like the Italians, who were massively recruited in Belgium after World War II, while I think there is a need for a comparative study of the role of Moroccan miners, who, after a tradition of mine work in northern France, arrived in several other Northwest-European coalfields in their dying stage.

*Labour markets and communities*

Meanwhile, the focus of research has shifted from the relationship of class, race and ethnic identity in workers’ struggles and the formation of trade unions, mentioned in the overview

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by Phimister, to other aspects and with different approaches. Migration and ethnic segregation have been studied in the contexts of both mining labour markets and mining communities.

Price Fishback explained the differences in the experiences of African-American miners in the American coalfields between racial discrimination and assimilation by the tightness or looseness of labour markets there. African-Americans did better in the Alabama and West-Virginia labour markets, because employers were constantly seeking new workers, and black migrants found ample employment. This contrasted with coalfields further north, where limits on employment growth constrained African-American immigration. In West-Virginia a large number of black miners worked side by side with other ethnic groups and were easily accepted in the Union of Mine Workers.

Fishback relates the arrival of different migrant groups in the US mines to different phases of exploitation: most British immigrants, among them Welsh miners, for instance, came with coal mining experience and helped train American workers. They played a major role in the early development of the US coal industry in the mid 1800s. Later, in the 1880s, and the more so between 1890 and 1910, in the Pennsylvania and Mid-west mining regions inexperienced immigrants from Eastern- and Southern-Europe were employed on a massive scale to fill the need for unskilled labour. The coalfields in the low wage southern states (Kentucky, (West-)Virginia, Alabama) attracted much more African-American workers, migrating north from the deep south. As can be seen in this example, different ethnic groups with different positions in the job hierarchy, could be unevenly recruited both temporally and geographically. Consider, for instance, the extremely different position of migrant workers in the Walloon (Belgian) and the Dutch mining districts: while – mainly Italian – migrants became a permanent workforce in the Walloon mines (after World War II they were a majority underground), in the nearby Dutch mines they were only temporarily recruited as a labour reserve in boom periods. In the last case they were typically secondary workers in a ‘split labour market’, while in the Walloon case they were not.

Migration of skilled miners

The pattern of early migration of a skilled group of workers to introduce mining skills in the starting phase of mining districts, followed by a wave of inexperienced, and often secondary migrants in the expansion phase, as noted by Fishback for the American coalfields, can be discerned in several other mining regions as well, also within the same ethnic group. In the north of France (Nord-Pas-de-Calais), mining skills were introduced at the end of the 18th century by skilled miners from the Borinage and the Charleroi districts just across the border in Belgium.\(^{33}\) Polish migration to the Ruhr area started in the 1870s with the recruitment of skilled miners from Upper-Silesia (then still part of the German state), where coal mining had a much longer history. The first Polish migrants arrived in Bottrop from the Silesian mining town Rybnik.\(^{34}\) In the expansion phase following this initial immigration, however, most of the Polish migrants were unskilled workers, recruited from the countryside in East- and West-Prussia. In South-Wales in the 1870s English migrants at first came from older coalfields in Radstock and the Forest of Dean in Somerset and Gloucester; in the 1880s and 1890s, however, they came from rural districts (‘sons of the soil’) to work in the ‘lowest paid jobs underground’.\(^{35}\) In the British empire, skilled British miners moved from coalfield to coalfield in colonies like Canada, Australia or New Zealand to develop coal mining there. Migration trajectories, return and circular migration, and ethnic diasporas can be traced in many coal mining districts.

Segregation and integration in mining communities

The shift towards the study of migration and ethnicity in mining communities is clearly reflected in the volume of Stefan Berger, cited before. Several chapters deal with ‘identities’, ‘communities’, and organizations’, and with the ‘interlocking spheres of workplace, neighbourhood, family and working class organizations’. One of the more promising approaches is the one by Leen Beyers in this volume on ‘ethnic, class and gender identities at street level’ in the Belgian miners’ colony Zwartberg (near the Belgian Limburg town of

\(^{33}\) Gérard Dumont, ‘Une immigration fondatrice: les Belges’, in: Cégarra et al., \textit{Tous gueules noires}, 17-31


In the French coalfields in Nord-Pas-de-Calais there have been inspiring studies on what the French call la sociabilité in mining villages, also in connection with the integration of (Polish) migrants. In this field interesting research has been published by the French historian Marion Fontaine on the role of migrants in sociabilités sportives, more specifically football, which, of course is a typical miners’ sport all over Europe. A comparative study of the role of migrant miners in football would be most welcome.

**Plans**

The overview by Phimister and the volume edited by Berger c.s., supplemented by the bibliographical research cited above, give a clear indication of the global scope of research on migration and ethnicity in coalfield history. There is a need to expand comparisons and exchange globally. From the examples cited above four themes in comparative research on the impact of migration and ethnicity could be addressed:

- workers struggles and labour relations;
- segmentation and discrimination in mining labour markets;
- transnational labour mobility and ethnic diaspora’s;
- the mining community between integration and segregation.

Comparative papers studying developments in coalfields in different countries and continents would be most welcome.

A committee has been formed consisting of Ad Knotter (Maastricht, organizer), Stefan Berger (Bochum) and Chris Williams (Swansea). An additional member from a non-European country would be most welcome.

We plan:

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36 Beyers, ‘Everyone Black?’.
- A session on this issue at the European Social Science History Conference 2014 in Vienna (see http://esshc.socialhistory.org/)
- To edit a special issue of the International Review of Social History 2015 (see http://socialhistory.org/nl/irsh)
- A workshop/conference in 2015 (yet to be organized and financed)

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