

Forced labor in European colonies

16th-20th centuries

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ABSTRACT

Forms of forced labor existed during the sixteenth century in Spanish America. However, it was during the modern period—after the abolition of slavery, and after or concurrent with indentured labor—that forced labor was systematically used in European colonies, either for the benefit of the colonists (in Java beginning in 1830), major concessionary companies (Belgian Congo and French Congo), or the “development” of colonies by the colonial state (in particular the AOF, *l’Afrique-Occidentale française*).



Building of a railway in Dahomey around 1900. Photo: Roger Viollet

One can classify as such various forms of imposed labor that, unlike slavery, were temporary and compensated, but that had conditions inferior to those on the market. Five forms of it were described in the International Labour Organization's General Conference in 1930: requisition, prestation, conscript labor, penal labor, compulsory cultivation.

Forced labor during the early modern period

Forced labor was implemented in Spanish America, notably in mines such as Potosí in 1545. It was in continuity with the personal *corvées* demanded by the Mexicas (Aztecs) and Incas of their tributaries. Under the authority of

the Indian leader, the *cacique*, who was recognized by the Spanish authorities, a percentage of the population was forced to work in rotation, for a number of weeks or even a year, on farms (*estancias, haciendas*), sugar mills (*trapiches*), or weaving workshops (*obrajes*). As soon as they arrived in Cape Town in the seventeenth century, the Boers used the forced service of portions of local populations in addition to that of imported slaves.

Indentured labor

Indentured labor can also be mentioned in this context, for the conditions of recruitment (in general for three to five years), along with the harshness of the conditions of workers, warrant connecting it with forced labor, in fact if not in law.

During the nineteenth century, abolition came at a time when colonial plantations of the older type had a growing need for manpower, and as new European colonization required more and more workers. Although the use of African manpower recruited under contract ended in 1859 in French colonies, the British (in Maurice and South Africa), and to a lesser extent the French (from Pondicherry toward Reunion), resorted to the manpower of Indian coolies and the Chinese. For example, "Malaysia alone recorded 7 million entries of Chinese migrants between 1840 and 1940"—and "nearly 15 million Chinese coolies left their country to work across the globe"—numbers that can be compared to the 1-2 million Indians used solely in the British Empire.

Forced labor during the modern period

In Java, the governor Van den Bosch implemented in 1830 a system of compulsory cultivation obliging peasants to devote 1/5th of their land and work to export crops for the benefit of the state.

However, the areas that suffered the most were those given to concessionary companies in central Africa: the colonized were forced to take part in an exhausting natural rubber harvest, which was imposed at the price of the worst maltreatment, and which was denounced by Edmund Morel (*Red Rubber...*, 1907) for the Congo Free State, and by André Gide (*Voyage au Congo*, 1927) for French Equatorial Africa (AEF).

In British settlement colonies in Africa (nineteenth to twentieth centuries), there existed various forms of forced labor, whereas in British West Africa it disappeared around 1920, except when disguised as *political labour*.

Although the different forms of forced labor were on many occasions redirected for the benefit of the colonists in French Sub-Saharan Africa during the twentieth century, especially in Madagascar, they were first and foremost practiced for the benefit of the colonial state. The colonizer needed manpower for its plantations and worksites, and found no other means of making the population work, as the latter had maintained control over the land, and was able to ensure its subsistence by growing food crops, with no need to work for the former (hence the theme of the "inveterate laziness of the native.")

There had already been *requisitions* of porters in every colony during the colonial penetration. The annual duration of *prestations en travail* [work service] was in theory limited to two weeks in the AOF, and involved using the adult male population for local public works, such as road maintenance or building construction. The practice recalls the *corvée* used by the Ancien Régime, although the colonizer also took inspiration from certain *prestations* required in Africa in the past, such as the *fokonolona* in Madagascar. There were also requisitions of labor used for longer periods of time far from the village, for major works such as roads, dams, and railroads (in AEF, the construction of the Congo-Océan, which was said to have cost *as many deaths as it had crossties*, was denounced by Albert Londres in *Terre d'ébène*, 1929).

Indigenous leaders had to provide a quota of workers, who were supervised by *gardes-de-cercle* [African auxiliary policemen]. In a Peul manuscript from Guinea, one of these *gardes-de-cercle* was described in the following

manner: "A single large chimpanzee fell upon us, driving before him a troop of porters; on their heads were loads too heavy for their strength // The whip never left his hand, the great beast carried out without fail the orders of the deniers of God." Some requisitions were made for faraway worksites: Voltaics in forest worksites in the Ivory Coast, works or cultivation projects of the Office du Niger, etc.

The *war effort* provided by the population between 1939-1945 and 1914-1918, by way of the dispatch of strategic products (harvested rubber in Guinea, etc.), should also be mentioned. In certain cases the *deuxième portion* [quasi-military service] was requisitioned from the contingent recruited for military service, and less systematically from common-law *prisoners*.

Finally, we shall also mention compulsory cultivation linked to the desire to develop export crops. For example, *prestations en travail* were required in the *commander's fields*, in certain cases not exceeding one day of work per week, while in others leading to blatant abuse denounced on multiple occasions by colonial inspectors, albeit in vain. In French Upper Volta, for instance, the governor Hessling (1919-1927) wanted to develop the cultivation of cotton.

The repeal of forced labor (Houphouët-Boigny law, 1946) put an end to what is still today called *le temps de la force* in certain former colonies.

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