

# Compulsory Mine Work: The Single-Party Regime and the Zonguldak Coalfield as a Site of Contention, 1940–1947

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**SUMMARY:** This study examines the forms of state domination over mine labour and the struggles of coalminers at the Zonguldak coalfield during World War II. It is focused on the everyday experiences of compulsory workers as reflected in petitions by those workers and the surveillance materials of the single-party regime at the time. Its aim is to reveal how, under an authoritarian regime, compulsory workers created a political agency. The compulsory labour system was one of the most coercive devices with which the state controlled mine labour between 1940 and 1947, but the compulsory workers negotiated with the political elite for their living and working conditions, and did so within a political sphere which had been devised by the ruling elite as a governmental strategy for managing and shaping the population. By subverting the political discourse of the ruling elite, the miners contributed not just to the development of workers' rights, but also helped reveal the merits of a democratic society.

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## INTRODUCTION

Even though Turkey did not enter World War II, working people and small peasants suffered from the wartime economic policies of the single-party regime.<sup>1</sup> The wartime policies ushered in a new period in the Zonguldak coalfield, Turkey's source of coal ever since the mid-nineteenth century. To ensure adequate supplies of coal for the public sector, the state nationalized coalmining in 1940 and introduced a compulsory labour

1. For the impact of the state's economic policies on the small peasants and workers, see Şevket Pamuk, "War, State Economic Policies and Resistance by Agricultural Producers in Turkey, 1939–1945", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 2 (1988), pp. 19–36; Ahmet Makal, "65. Yılında Milli Korunma Kanunu", *Toplum ve Bilim*, 102 (2005), pp. 55–91.

system,<sup>2</sup> which between them intensified state penetration into the everyday lives of the coalminers, most of whom were small peasants from the nearby villages and towns. Along with the compulsory labour system, the state's forced purchasing of a proportion of the cereal crops from villages complicated relations between workers and state. This article explores the forms of state domination over mine labour and workers' struggles during World War II by studying living and working conditions in the mines and villages. I will argue that while the compulsory workers did not rebel openly, neither did they submit meekly to state authority. The coercive policies of government were contested and negotiated by the workers in a dynamic political sphere which had been constituted by the ruling elite in order to shape popular opinion; and by subverting the dominant language in that sphere, the workers succeeded in promoting the merits of democratic society and workers' rights.

In most studies on the single-party era, which lasted from 1925 to 1945, the Republican People's Party (RPP) and the Kemalist cadre appear as the primary actors of historical change, but the prevailing emphasis on the interests and concerns of the political elite has tended to narrow the spectrum of historical agents. An "elite-centric" perspective largely ignores the experiences and struggles of working people and small peasants, although they shaped the policies of the ruling elite. Overemphasis on the authoritarian nature of the single-party era has prevented historians from discerning the existence of a dynamic political life within which relatively powerless groups fought for their own particular interests. Consequently, the lower classes appear in historical narratives as silent masses subjected to the policies and administrative practices of the ruling elite,<sup>3</sup> whereas our focus on the struggles of the compulsory workers, who were after all small peasants who paid tax, affords us the opportunity to uncover the political agency of the lower classes, who played an active role in making their own history. The Zonguldak miners are a good example of the experiences of a great number of workers during the single-party era.<sup>4</sup> This study offers a sort of local lens with which to examine the condition of the labour force in the single-party era of the Turkish Republic too.

Although the time of compulsory labour at the Zonguldak coalfield has received some scholarly attention during the past several years, that has

2. For the use of forced labour in different countries during the war, see Stephen Kotkin, "World War Two and Labor: A Lost Cause?", *International Labor and Working Class History*, 58 (2000), pp. 181–191.

3. For a discussion of the elite-centric approach, see Nadir Özbek, "Alternative Tarih Tahayyülleri: Siyaset, İdeoloji ve Osmanlı-Türkiye Tarihi", *Toplum ve Bilim*, 96 (2003), pp. 234–254.

4. For the state of the workforce during the single-party era, see Ahmet Makal, "Sanayileşme Sürecinde İşgücü Sorunu ve Sosyal Politika", *Toplum ve Bilim*, 92 (2002), pp. 38–45.

been limited to highlighting oppression by the state.<sup>5</sup> The repressive labour legislation of the era, with its strict limitation of labour organizations, has led historians to neglect the different forms of worker resistance.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, their focus on the workplace has restricted the spatial dimension of labour to the mines and concealed the profound ties between mines and villages. The destructive effects on the villages of the compulsory labour system have therefore remained entirely outside the considerations of other studies, which overlook how firmly coercive economic policies were interlocked with local power struggles. This article portrays the coalfield as much as an economic as a social and political space, in which representatives of state authority, various local actors, and workers themselves continuously interacted.

In examining the complex relations between the state and the compulsory workers, we shall emphasize various points. First, we shall examine the dynamic nature of those relations. The state exercised both coercive and paternalistic forms of domination over labour in the changing composition, which depended on contestation and negotiation between the workers and the RPP. The emphasis on the mixed nature of state domination brings us to the second point of the article: paternalistic practices constituted a political sphere in which workers participated as citizens of the republic. The ambivalent character of that sphere allowed workers to negotiate the terms of coercive policies using the language of paternalism-deference reciprocity, in conjunction with the language of citizen rights.<sup>7</sup> In the end, the workers managed to undermine the coercive policies, and transmuted the paternalist notion of justice into the notion of rights. The state thereafter sought new forms of domination over mine labour, after the war. There can be no doubt that the experiences of the workers and the labour policies of the state were equally important elements of the class struggles of the single-party era, and as everyday life is the fabric of class struggles the actual experiences of

5. For some of the publications, see Mehmet Şehmus Güzel, "Capital and Labor during World War II", in Donald Quataert and Erik Jan Zürcher (eds), *Workers and the Working Class in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, 1839–1950* (London, 1995), pp. 127–145; Makal, "65. Yılında", pp. 55–91; Kadir Tuncer, *Tarihten Günümüze Zonguldak'ta İşçi Sınıfının Durumu Kampanyalar Dönemine Geri Dönüş* (Istanbul, 1998).

6. For the labour policies of the single-party regime, see Erdal Yavuz, "The State of the Industrial Workforce, 1923–40", in Quataert and Zürcher, *Workers and the Working Class*, pp. 99–107.

7. E.P. Thompson's conceptualization of gentry-crowd reciprocity and the paternalism-deference equilibrium for eighteenth-century English society provides a fruitful conceptual framework to define the relationship between the RPP and the compulsory workers; E.P. Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?", *Social History*, 3 (1978), pp. 133–165; and *idem*, "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture", *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), pp. 382–405.

workers and the daily presence of the state in the coalfield bore the hallmarks of class struggles everywhere.

This article is based primarily on reports prepared by the RPP's representatives and the petitions, complaints, and denunciations submitted to the RPP by workers and village authorities, with the inspection reports of some of the technical commissions making up a second source. The first set of documents contains the impressions and opinions of the RPP's representatives about the conditions of the workers in the mines and villages, the implementation of the new economic policies, and their impact on the everyday lives of the people, while the petitions and denunciations contain the grievances and requests of the workers. As they transmit to us the voices of the political elite, the village authorities, and the workers, the documents provide a unique opportunity to capture the moods, worries, concerns, and expectations of the actors, and all in their own words. The documents provide a means to trail the conflicts and negotiations between state authorities and workers in the course of everyday life, and their contesting of the definition of reality.

#### THE OTTOMAN LEGACY AT THE ZONGULDAK COALFIELD

The extraction of coal as a commodity in the Black Sea region, extending from Ereğli to Amasra, goes back to the 1840s. The status of the coalfield as imperial property and the state's increasing need for coal made the Ottoman state the primary actor there. Unfree labour was introduced onto the Zonguldak coalfield in 1867 to meet the needs of the Ottoman Navy and of various state factories. The labour-intensive nature of coal-mining compelled the state to impose compulsory labour on the male population of the fourteen districts in and adjacent to the coalfield. The workers worked underground on a rotational basis for twelve days at a time, and were paid wages and exempted from military service in return.<sup>8</sup> In time, the use of unfree labour on a part-time basis became customary in the coalfield, as men toiled underground to pay off obligations, usually debts and taxes. In 1940, when the Turkish republic reinstated the compulsory labour system, it made great use of the Ottoman legacy.

The first period of compulsory labour brought about a profound change in the lives of the villagers, who had earned their living from agriculture, forestry, boat building, or seasonal work in Istanbul.<sup>9</sup> In the course of time, their work patterns and livelihood strategies underwent

8. Donald Quataert, *Miners and the State in the Ottoman Empire: The Zonguldak Coalfield, 1822–1920* (New York, 2006), pp. 41–58.

9. For the subsistence economy of the villagers, see *ibid.*, pp. 25–27, 96. For the compulsory labour system, and its impact on the daily lives of the villagers, see pp. 40–58, 95–123.

great transformations. The rotational work system in the mines enabled the villagers to develop flexible patterns between mining and subsistence agriculture, and enabled the state to preserve the rural social fabric of the region, and its agricultural tax revenues. Compulsory labour made the relationship between village authorities and villagers a complicated affair, merging existing local power relations inside villages with those of the workplace. The village headman and council of elders were charged with the task of recruiting and dispatching the workers to the mines, and were given overwhelming power over fellow villagers both in mines and in villages.<sup>10</sup>

The compulsory labour system constituted a fragmented workforce with both free and unfree workers. While the villagers of Ereğli and active-duty soldiers provided unfree labour, Ottoman citizens from outside the coalfield and a small number of administrative and technical personnel from various European countries acted as free labour. Local workers specialized in most of the underground work and performed all the labour at the coalface. Free workers from the eastern Black Sea and eastern Anatolia performed both underground auxiliary work and certain jobs above ground, and gradually became part of a permanent and, to some degree, skilled workforce. In addition, hundreds of free workers were employed in ventilation and water-pumping work, repair shops, railways, port, and so on.<sup>11</sup> At the end of the century, as coal production became profitable, native and foreign capital alike flowed into the coalfield, and by the 1910s the pastoral landscape of the region had been transformed by the coal industry.<sup>12</sup>

The compulsory system became a means whereby the state could exert control over the labour market. It arranged workers hierarchically and fixed regional markers as indicators of the ranges of various workers. Thus, while non-local Ottomans and foreign workers constituted the free, full-time, skilled, and semiskilled workforce, locals made up the unfree, part-time, and unskilled one. As labour became scarce, workers from different districts were allowed into work categories that up to then had been reserved for locals. Various local actors then became recruiting agents, mobilizing hundreds both from within and outside the coalfield.<sup>13</sup> Eventually, while the regional division of labour became blurred, job specialization on a regional basis became established custom.<sup>14</sup>

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 99–104, 56.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 52–69.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 80–88.

13. The reminiscences of a coalminer, Ethem Çavuş, provide a snapshot of relations between miners, labour recruiters, and mine operators; Donald Quataert and Yüksel Duman, “A Coal Miner’s Life during the Late Ottoman Empire”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60 (2001), pp. 153–179.

14. Quataert, *Miners and the State*, p. 52.

Despite the various divisions among workers, they succeeded in organizing themselves in response to their common interests. Between 1908 and 1913 a number of strikes, initiated mostly by surface workers, spread rapidly to include coalminers too. Shared complaints of unjust piecework rates, and fines, inhumane treatment, and overwork united all workers against the mining companies. Surface and underground workers went on strike, sometimes together, sometimes by trades alone.<sup>15</sup>

#### THE REPUBLICAN STATE, MINING CAPITAL, AND BONDED LABOUR

After the establishment of the Republican regime under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923, working conditions in the coalfield continued as before without improvement. In 1923, when a wave of strikes under the leadership of railway workers interrupted coal production, the government simply suppressed the unrest.<sup>16</sup> An official social security body was immediately established, which brought all workers under the paternalistic control of the state and impeded the formation of independent labour organizations. Although the Kemalist cadre had abolished compulsory labour in 1921, the practice of bonded labour continued.<sup>17</sup>

The lack of economic dynamism among the coal-consuming sectors in the country and a worldwide depression in the coal industry resulted in a stagnation in the Turkish coal industry. Coal enterprises made no move to mechanization because of the lack of any market incentive. In addition, during the 1920s the villagers of Zonguldak continued to provide mining companies with the cheapest means of coal production. Wages were so low that mechanization could not have reduced the cost of production any further<sup>18</sup> – in fact, it might well have been higher – and what made such low-cost production possible was the threefold confluence of the contract system, piecework, and bonded labour. Various local labour bosses bound their followers to certain pits for a specified period.<sup>19</sup> The intertwined relations between villages and mines facilitated the transfer of local power relations to the workplace, as community ties and debt-bond relationships fostered the personal authority of those actors over workers both there and in the villages. Miners could not work for whomever they

15. For the 1908 strikes, see Sina Çıladı, *Zonguldak Havzasındaki İşçi Hareketleri ve İşçi Örgütleri 1908–1993* (Karadeniz Ereğlisi, n.d.), pp. 3–4.

16. For the 1923 strikes, see Turgut Etingü, *Kömür Havzasında İlk Grev* (Istanbul, n.d.), pp. 78–98.

17. Mustafa Nuri Anıl and Nejdet Merey, *Türkiye’de Maden Mevzuatı*, 2 vols (Istanbul, 1942), II, p. 62.

18. “Ereğli Zonguldak Kömür Havzası”, *Meslek*, 13 (1925).

19. For the various sorts of local labour recruiter, see Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Republican Archives, Ankara [hereafter, PMRA], 4 December 1939, catalogue no. 30.1.0.0/2.11.3.

wished, nor could they leave their jobs at will. If they tried to they were threatened, being coerced and suffering in many ways,<sup>20</sup> sometimes, for example, being forced by village leaders with the help of gendarmes (provincial police officers) to work in the mines to pay off their tax dues.<sup>21</sup>

Irregular work patterns and the deep involvement of local authorities in recruitment continued unchanged until the mid-1930s.<sup>22</sup> The underground workers stayed at the mines during the agricultural off-season for irregular stretches of time ranging from a few days to years, although of course with intervals.<sup>23</sup> Since agriculture provided the livelihood for the workers' families, mine operators set wages at a level that would provide for the subsistence of only a single worker. The irregularity of the work also enabled mine operators to determine numbers of workers according to sales agreements made in advance with prospective coal buyers.

Although irregular work and poor social services received some criticism on the grounds of their combined effects of labour scarcity and low level of productivity, coal operators avoided taking comprehensive social policy measures.<sup>24</sup> Temporary workers lived in flimsy huts or unsound barracks, living on food they had brought with them from their villages. After they had paid off tax dues and their debts, they then returned to their villages with a little cash.<sup>25</sup>

In the 1930s, the government revised its coal policy when the principal consumers of coal became the state-owned railways, and newly established state factories under five-year industrial plans. In 1936, the Turkish state purchased the French Ereğli Company and transformed its mines into a public enterprise, Ereğli Kömürleri İşletmesi (EKİ). Mines were amalgamated under the management of EKİ and the coalmining companies of a national bank, Türkiye İş Bankası.<sup>26</sup>

During the 1930s, to overcome labour scarcity, companies improved living conditions for workers, to a certain extent at least. They constructed company accommodation for permanent workers and dormitories for temporary workers.<sup>27</sup> Even though there were some projects to construct company villages for the permanent settlement of temporary workers too, the government was reluctant to make fundamental changes.<sup>28</sup> In 1939, for

20. "Ereğli-Zonguldak Kömür Havzasında", *Meslek*, 17 (1925).

21. Turkey Grand National Assembly Minutes [hereafter, TGNAM], 15 (Ankara, 1976), p. 553.

22. TGNAM, 10 (Ankara, 1958), p. 215; Ahmet Naim, *Zonguldak Kömür Havzası (Uzun Mehmet'ten Bugüne Kadar)* (Istanbul, 1934), pp. 111–112, 150–152.

23. Archive of Maden Tetkik Arama Enstitüsü, Ankara [hereafter, AMTAE], 1927, folio 1272, pp. 41–47.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

25. TGNAM, 15, p. 553; and "Ereğli-Zonguldak Kömür Havzası", p. 4.

26. Ahmet Ali Özekan, *Türkiye Kömür Ekonomisi Tarihi* (Istanbul, 1955), pp. 53–59.

27. Sadrettin Enver, *Zonguldak Kömür Havzamız* (n.p., n.d.), pp. 79–80.

28. For an example of such a project, see Professor Granigg's plan, AMTAE, 1938, folio 1561.

instance, when labour scarcity was at its height, the companies recommended to the Prime Minister, Refik Saydam, that temporary workers be settled in company villages, to be constructed near the mines. However, Saydam rejected the idea, saying, “Let’s leave the villages be, for now.” That remark was to become the signature tune of state policy towards the temporary workers.<sup>29</sup>

In the 1930s, the RPP adopted an etatist economic policy.<sup>30</sup> The five-year industrial plans were expected to create jobs for almost 50,000 workers,<sup>31</sup> and although the ruling elite wanted to establish a national industry, they did not favour fully fledged industrialization, because of their great fear of its potential social and political consequences. The state perceived the rise of an urban working class, and social mobility of any sort that would be fostered by migration and urbanization, as serious threats to the social and political order. To prevent the formation of an urban working class, the state established industries in the countryside, where the employment was envisaged of only a few permanent workers but a large number of unskilled temporary workers from nearby villages.<sup>32</sup> In that way, the peasant family could be preserved as the unit of agricultural production, rather than of wage labour. The cost of the reproduction of labour power could be transferred to agriculture, while the preservation of the rural social and economic fabric would prevent the proletarianization of the rural masses, so preventing class conflict. Ideologically, the RPP tried to resolve the question of class conflict with solidarism, which was articulated by the motto, “a classless, privilege-free and united society”.<sup>33</sup>

In that context, the idea of a community settled around the coalmines triggered the working-class phobia of the Kemalist political elite. The Turkish republican state, much like the Ottoman one, favoured the preservation of the agrarian population in the coalfield, and since its concern was to hinder proletarianization of the temporary mineworkers, the best way was to contain them in their respective villages, and to discipline the labour supply with coercive practices.

In the late 1930s, as the demand of the public sector for coal increased, the scarcity of labour turned into a crisis, and the coal companies called

29. PMRA, 4 December 1939, catalogue no. 30.1.0.0/2.11.3.

30. For the economic policies of the single-party regime, see Korkut Boratav, “Kemalist Economic Policies and Etatism”, in Ali Kazancıgil and Ergun Özbudun (eds), *Atatürk: Founder of a Modern State* (London, 1981), pp. 167–176.

31. Ahmet Makal, “Sanayileşme Sürecinde”, p. 38.

32. For an evaluation of the considerations of the ruling elite and the peasantist intellectuals on the question of industrialization, urbanization, and proletarianization, see Asım Karaoğlu, “The People’s Houses and the Cult of the Peasant in Turkey”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34 (1998), pp. 73–85.

33. For the solidarism debates of the era, see Ahmet Makal, *Türkiye’de Tek Partili Dönemde Çalışma İlişkileri:1920–1946* (Ankara, 1999), pp. 44–160.

for state support to overcome labour shortages. Temporary workers, especially when they had a propitious harvest, were reluctant to work in the pits, so mining companies asked the state to bind them to the mines in lieu of payment of tax.<sup>34</sup> Another solution was the use of prison labour. In 1937 convicts began to work in the mines and in 1938, after suppressing an eastern Anatolian Kurdish insurgency, the state brought a number of Kurds to work there.<sup>35</sup> Even so, the labour shortage could not be resolved.

Rivalry among companies to overcome labour scarcity increased the bargaining power of the workers. Wages rose, which doubled production costs. In the words of the EKI management, rivalry among mining companies “had spoilt the workers and ruined the work discipline”.<sup>36</sup> In 1939, the mining companies agreed to take joint action against these same “spoiled workers”. They attempted to take full control of the labour market by getting rid of the local labour bosses, and their next step was to divide up the nearby villages among the coal pits, and then forcibly to bind workers to the companies. However, labour bosses promptly organized their workers and prevailed upon them to disobey the division imposed by the companies, which they did by recalling the 1936 Labour Law with its guarantee of free labour contract.<sup>37</sup> Having been confronted by this resistance from the workers, the only way to control the labour supply at low cost was by imposing compulsory labour. In 1939, the mining companies requested the government to impose compulsory labour on those workers who were to be conscripted into the army.<sup>38</sup> In February 1940, the government decided to enlarge the scope of compulsory labour, using the convenient excuse of the threat of war.

#### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE COMPULSORY LABOUR SYSTEM

The National Defence Law, passed on 18 January 1940, provided the government with the opportunity to discipline workers according to the exigencies of a war economy. The conscription of male citizens resulted in a significant labour shortage for both industry and agriculture. To overcome that scarcity, the government lengthened working hours and relaxed protective restrictions on child and women’s labour. Labour requirements for coal and lignite mines were met by imposing compulsory labour on

34. PMRA, 26 March 1937, catalogue no. 30.1.0.0/155.91.12.

35. For the use of convict labour, see Zonguldak CHP İlyön Kurulu, 923–938 *Cumhuriyet’in XV. Yıldönümü Hatırası* (Istanbul, 1938), p. 50; and for the employment of the Alevi workers, see Etibank, 1939 *Yılı Murakabe Heyeti Raporu* (Istanbul, 1940), pp. 15–18.

36. AMTAE, 1939, folio 1564.

37. PMRA, 4 December 1939, catalogue no. 30.1.0.0/2.11.3.

38. *Ibid.*

villagers from nearby provinces.<sup>39</sup> On 27 February 1940, a government decree brought compulsory labour to the male population between the ages of 16 and 53 in Zonguldak province. Any who had any experience in coalmining were compelled to perform various jobs underground on a monthly rotation. Miners from the provinces of the Black Sea region were subjected to the same compulsory work.<sup>40</sup>

Compulsory labour doubled the number of workers.<sup>41</sup> The system created a fragmented workforce, comprised of both free and unfree labour, with the compulsory workers as roughly 85 per cent of the total. Numbering nearly 40,000, the compulsory workers from Zonguldak made up the largest group, two groups from the same village working underground in one-month shifts on a rotational basis which was maintained until 1942, and was thereafter changed to forty-five days. Twelve thousand compulsory workers from Trabzon, Rize, and Giresun worked on a two-month shift. A small number of semiskilled workers, convicts, active-duty soldiers, and free workers made up the rest of the workforce. Consequently, an army of 60,000 workers stood ready to work.<sup>42</sup>

Hundreds of state functionaries were charged with disciplining workers in the mines and in the villages. EKI personnel kept workers under strict control in the workplace and dormitories. The Compulsory Labour Office organized the dispatching of workers to mining districts and their distribution among individual pits.<sup>43</sup> The Zonguldak provincial government served the state in allocating cereals provided by the villagers and by organizing the flow of labour between the villages and the mines. Along with compulsory labour, government purchase of cereals doubled the misery of the workers. The state seized both cereals and labour power at low prices, which gave village authorities overwhelming power over the villagers. Both practices had the effect of complicating existing power relations both in the villages and in the workplace.

Village headmen, gendarmes, and compulsory labour officials were of special importance as they had individual contact with the labourers. While village headmen oversaw the whole process of recruitment and dispatch of workers to the pits, the gendarmes chased fugitives and would return them to the pits by force if necessary. Village headmen were

39. For the impact of the National Defence Law on working life, see Makal, “65. Yılında”, pp. 55–91.

40. Anıl and Meray, *Türkiye’de Maden*, II, p. 256.

41. Başbakanlık Umumi Murakabe Heyeti [hereafter, BUMH], Etibank Ereğli Kömürleri İşletmesi Müessesesi [hereafter, EEKİM] 1944 Yılı Umumi Murakabe Heyeti Raporu (n.p., n.d.), p. 130.

42. Ahmet Ali Özeken, *Türkiye Sanayinde İşçilik Mevzuunun İktisadi Problemleri* (Istanbul, 1948), pp. 19–20; Safa S. Erkün, “Kömür Havzamızda Hükümlülerin çalıştırılması”, *İş Dergisi*, 45 (1945), p. 23.

43. Anıl and Meray, *Türkiye’de Maden*, II, pp. 185–189.

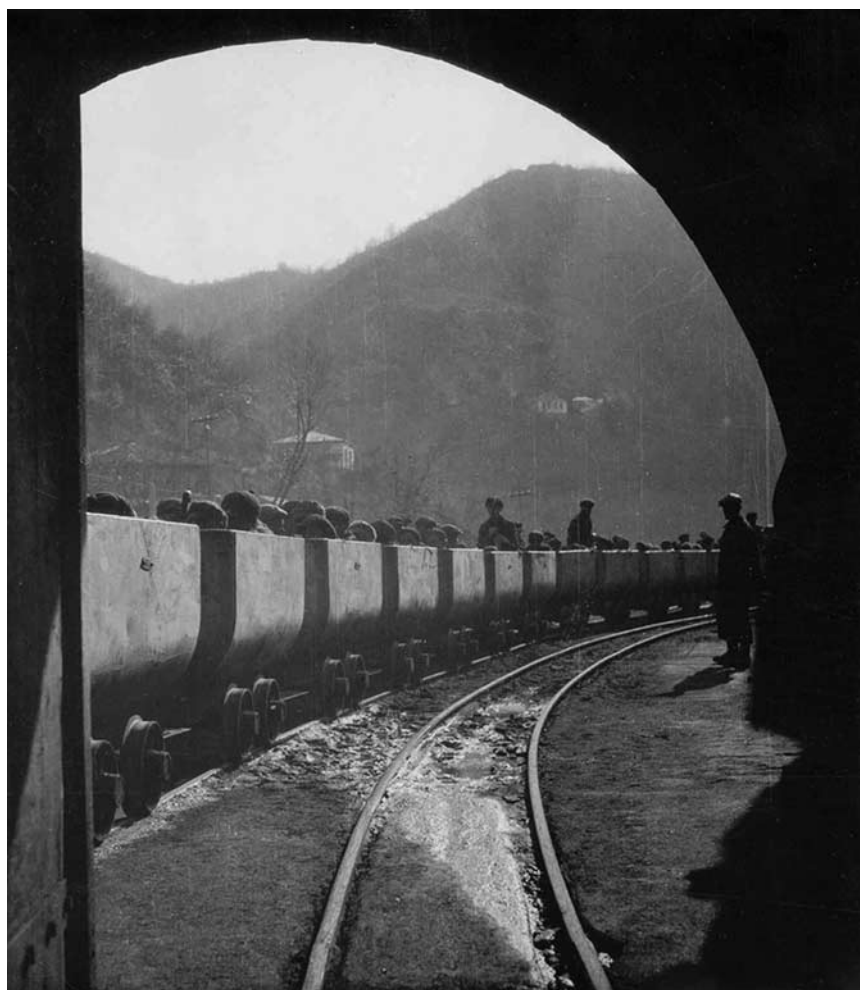


Figure 1. Compulsory workers at the mine entrance.  
*From the author's private collection.*

themselves members of the commissions that drew up estimates in the field for the purchase of cereals, and gendarmes performed their duties cruelly – corporal punishment of family members of fugitives was a source of particular grievance.<sup>44</sup> Their new responsibilities gave lower-ranked authorities a considerable amount of income – for example, the village headman received a sum of money for each man he brought to the

44. PMRA, 3 December 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/722.470.1.

mines. Moreover, there were widespread rumours that village headmen were taking bribes in return for promising to set compulsory workers free from their obligations. As for the gendarmes, they practically set up a tariff, of 15–20 liras, for letting a fugitive go.<sup>45</sup>

The initial response of the labourers to increasing oppression was to escape from the mines. In 1940, about half the number of total workers were absentees,<sup>46</sup> and in spite of heavy fines and imprisonment workers could not be prevented from escaping.<sup>47</sup> Between 1942 and 1943 a quarter of compulsory workers went absent, thanks to the web of informal relations.<sup>48</sup> Various functionaries in charge of recording workplace attendance, and the headmen in the villages, played their part in condoning absenteeism and escapes. The leaders of certain villages even resisted the order to prepare rosters for the compulsory workers from their own villages.<sup>49</sup>

To prevent the increasing non-attendance, the state allowed officials to intensify their oppression. In 1942, military order was established in the coalfield. The status of the compulsory workers was now listed as “deferred soldier”.<sup>50</sup> When workers violated the terms of their compulsory labour they were treated as active-duty soldiers under the authority of the Ministry of National Defence and would be sent to the frontiers to undertake hard labour.<sup>51</sup> However, since the new imposition solved nothing, and if anything decreased the number of workers in the pits, in 1943 the Mine Service Battalion was raised at Zonguldak in which defaulters served out their sentences while working in the mines.

#### THE RPP’S PETITION CHANNELS AS THE SPHERE OF CONTENTION

The state could no longer maintain coal production by relying solely on coercion. The large numbers of fugitives, the RPP’s deep fear of social disturbance, and its desire for popular consent compelled it to come up with various strategies to generate that consent. Among them, the petition channels of the RPP were of vital importance. During the period, RPP deputies, party inspectors, the General Secretary of the RPP, and the RPP’s Zonguldak branch prepared inspection reports and passed on to the government the grievances and demands of citizens who felt aggrieved by

45. PMRA, 24 October 1945, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/491.1978.1.

46. Hürrem Barım, *Ücretli İş Mükellefiyeti* (Zonguldak, 1941), p. 63.

47. *Zonguldak Gazette*, 16 October 1942; *Ocak Gazette*, 5 December 1942.

48. İhsan Soyak Archive [hereafter, ISA], Zonguldak, EKİ, 1943 Yılı Faaliyet Raporu, no. 81, pp. 3–14.

49. PMRA, 20 January 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/721.467.1; see also Nuri Gün’s petition, PMRA, 24 October 1945, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/491.1978.1.

50. PMRA, 26 August 1942, catalogue no. 030.18 01/02.99.79.2.

51. Etingü, *Kömür Havzasında*, p. 114.

its coercive economic policies and resented oppression by the local bureaucracy. Unquestionably, those petition channels put in place by the RPP were part of the regime's governmental strategies.<sup>52</sup>

The channels of communication functioned as the eyes and ears of the government, enabling it to weave itself into the fabric of everyday life in the coalfields. By monitoring social unrest, the government was able to take effective measures to appease discontented groups, as the information flowing through these channels allowed it to formulate new policies for the efficient control of both the population and its provincial government.

Along with surveillance, the petition channels enabled the RPP to restore its own legitimacy. Aggrieved groups were invited to resolve their grievances within the limits set by the regime, and people "should be persuaded above all to abandon an insubordinate posture, to couch their demands in legitimate and deferential terms: they should learn that they were likely to get more from a loyal petition than from a riot".<sup>53</sup>

In that sense, rather than prompting democratic participation in politics at the grassroots level, the petition channels became a mechanism for mollifying social discontent, while in fact seeking to reinforce paternalistic forms of domination over workers. So in effect, the RPP had recourse to a paternalism–deference equilibrium to control social discontent. By sending the message that it was still only they who could secure workers' welfare, and support them during sickness or famine, the RPP made itself out to be a benevolent father figure to workers, requiring, in return, their deference. The RPP assumed the role of the just ruler, arbitrating between corrupt local authorities and poor workers. By presenting itself thus, the RPP sought to stay on the sidelines of the actual battles between local bureaucracy and workers. These positive gestures to the workers were intended to make them malleable miners, deferential producers, and obedient citizens.

Even though the petition channels were part of the governmental practices, they created an intense communication between people and government, by means of which both sides, albeit with unequal power, negotiated their particular interests. The RPP constituted a dynamic political sphere in which compulsory workers pressured political bodies to improve living and working conditions, and simultaneously to soften existing coercive economic policies, in return for the required deference. As long as the RPP found a way into the lives of villagers through its

52. For a discussion on how the RPP employed petition channels to watch, shape, and control the population, see Yiğit Akın, "Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi Sosyal Tarihçiliğinde Dilekçeler", *Toplum ve Bilim*, 99 (2003/2004), pp. 73–111; Murat Metinsoy, "Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde Mebusların 'İntihap Bölgesi' ve 'Teftiş Bölgesi' Raporları", *Tarih ve Toplum Yeni Yaklaşımlar*, 3 (2006), pp. 103–169.

53. Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture", p. 405.

petition channels, the villagers turned those channels into an opportunity for themselves to shape the policies and practices of the government. Workers thereby effectively compelled the RPP to perform its responsibilities. A paternalist ruler who seized from them their sustenance and labour, but did not ensure their livelihood, had no right to expect acquiescence from workers.

However, compulsory workers had no choice but to play the game according to the vocabularies of the dominant political discourse. In their interaction with the RPP, they borrowed key components of the dominant language. Each of the actors employed rhetorical strategies to persuade the other. Hence, the dominant language itself became the arena of the struggle over a definition of reality. Since “the word in language is half someone else’s”,<sup>54</sup> by appropriating the other half of that word the compulsory workers imposed their everyday experiences on the words of the given discourse; so they used the RPP’s own words against it. Neither compulsory workers nor village community constituted a homogeneous unit, so different groups appropriated different components of the elite’s rhetoric. While local authorities made use of the RPP’s principles of populism, republicanism, and nationalism, the compulsory workers talked of the right to livelihood, of government by law and by justice, and of reciprocal rights and duties.<sup>55</sup> What shaped the compulsory workers’ ideas about the coercive policies of the state was their day-to-day experience. That meant that when they used the language of the state, they were not addressing the same repertoire of meanings. Their livelihood was under threat, working conditions in the mines were extremely difficult, their treatment by the authorities was cruel, bureaucracy was oppressive, and it was all of that which constituted the world of meanings for the villagers and workers. Their own experience both urged and empowered them to question the official description of reality.

#### THE WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS OF COMPULSORY WORKERS

During the compulsory labour period, thousands of workers were employed in mines with no infrastructure to answer their basic needs. The government’s policy to “maintain production without interruption, at whatever cost” determined working and living conditions.<sup>56</sup> The government’s mentality resulted in their regarding workers solely as a labour

54. Quoted in Marc W. Steinberg, “‘A Way of Struggle’: Reformations and Affirmations of E.P. Thompson’s Class Analysis in the Light of Postmodern Theories of Language”, *British Journal of Sociology*, 48 (1997), p. 479.

55. PMRA, 24 October 1945, catalogue no. 490.1.0./0491.1978.1.

56. PMRA, 31 March 1941, catalogue no. 30.10.0.0/167.160.5.

force, with any sort of social policy based on the language of rights being remote, to say the least. However, as the number of workers increased, social services inevitably became an important item of expense,<sup>57</sup> and aiming at the maximum production at the minimum cost the EKI calculated as expenditure even the barest minimum necessities for the survival of the workers. The workers themselves proceeded to challenge the economic rationale of the government, arguing instead for an alternative rationale that would accept them as individuals and social beings. They therefore pressed the government to improve working and living conditions.

Accommodation was one of the points at issue. Although dormitories for workers provided the EKI with the low costs they wanted, the capacity of the dormitories was nothing like enough to house all the workers. In 1941, an inspection report summarized accommodation conditions as follows:

A great majority of workers [...] have no stoves for heating, no beds or even mattresses, they have to lie wretchedly on bare dirt ground, twenty per cent of the workers don't even have a roof over their heads and have to lie beneath trees in the summer time and in winter take turns in sharing beds, where within twenty-four hours two to three workers sleep in one bed. Most buildings have no bathrooms and what few bathrooms exist are unusable because there is no water. Again, because of lack of water, workers are unable to wash for months. The lavatories, which cannot be flushed, are not only filthy and insanitary, but also insufficient in number, so the surrounding area of the buildings is infested.<sup>58</sup>

Seeing the complaints of the workers, RPP deputies demanded that the government improve conditions immediately.<sup>59</sup> The accommodation problem was indeed solved, to a certain degree, in the following years.<sup>60</sup>

Nourishment was no better than accommodation. The Zonguldak governor reported in 1941 that during their daily shifts, underground workers performed heavy work with only a cup of soup and a very unsatisfactory meal every twenty-four hours. As a result, rotational labourers lost body mass in the mines and returned home in pitiful condition.<sup>61</sup> The quality of the food itself was questionable. After analysing the provisions, the Public Health Centre recommended the use of the supplies there only in case of emergency.<sup>62</sup> Most of the workers chose to live on whatever they had brought with them from their villages, not least because the meal service was not free of charge until 1942.<sup>63</sup>

57. Etibank Mahdud Mes'uliyetli Ereğli Kömürleri İşletmesi Müessesesinin 1939 Yılı Umumi Murakabe Heyeti Raporu (n.p., 1940), p. 18.

58. PMRA, 31 March 1941, catalogue no. 30.10.0.0/167.160.5.

59. PMRA, 20 January 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/721.467.1.

60. BUMH, EEKIM 1946 Yılı Raporu (n.p., n.d.), p. 97.

61. Halid Aksoy, PMRA, 19 March 1941, catalogue no. 30.10.0.0/167.160.3.

62. PMRA, 31 March 1941, catalogue no. 30.10.0.0/167.160.5.

63. BUMH, *İşçi Meseleleri ve İctimai Teşkilatı Hakkında 1941 Yılı Raporu* (Ankara, 1941), p. 25.



Figure 2. The political elite and the workers at lunch.  
*From the author's private collection.*

In those years, not only the coalfields but the whole country faced a severe shortage of food,<sup>64</sup> and the amount of bread given to the workers was reduced. The year 1942 was one of crisis in coal production. Workers absconding could not be prevented. Discontent was great among the coalfield population and the EKI resorted to various welfare measures to reduce complaints and win over workers. As malnutrition had reduced performance, the authorities started to take workers' diet seriously – from September 1942 workers received food free of charge,<sup>65</sup> and the weight of the bread allowance was increased. Low-priced fabrics, seeds for planting food crops, and various consumer products were distributed among the workers.<sup>66</sup>

Health services constituted the third subject of contention. Working long hours surrounded by coal dust in dark, humid, poorly ventilated pits, workers were susceptible to respiratory and lung diseases.<sup>67</sup> Work accidents were a part of their daily lives. In those years, nearly half of all work accidents in Turkey occurred in the Zonguldak coalmines,<sup>68</sup>

64. PMRA, 28 August 1943, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/513.2061.2.

65. ISA, EKİ, 1942 Yılı Hesaplarımızı Kontrol Eden Komisyon Raporu, p. 26.

66. BUMH, 1946 Yılı Raporu, p. 97.

67. Sabire Dosdoğru and Hulusi Dosdoğru, *Sağlık Açısından Maden İşçilerimizin Dünü Bugünü* (Istanbul, 1990), pp. 32–38.

68. Orhan Tuna, "İş İstatistikleri", *İÜ İktisat Fakültesi Mecmuası*, 6 (1944–1945), p. 345.

the main reason being the excessive work pressure and inadequate safety precautions.<sup>69</sup>

Along with accidents, epidemic and contagious diseases threatened the lives of the workers,<sup>70</sup> and the rotational work system allowed sickness to spread easily. In 1943, for example, typhus spread throughout the coalfield;<sup>71</sup> most of the victims were from workers' families.<sup>72</sup> But the government took preventive measures only after the epidemics began to threaten production levels, and the measures were implemented cruelly.<sup>73</sup> For instance, workers were forcibly sent to bath-houses and they had to wait naked while the only sets of clothes they owned were steam-cleaned.<sup>74</sup>

The workers, whose health was deteriorating rapidly, demanded improvements in health services, which were financed by deductions from their wages. In the RPP provincial congresses, villagers voiced their grievances about not receiving any health services, saying that the doctors treated them harshly, the health personnel neglected their duties, and people were dying needlessly.<sup>75</sup> In the following years, the government constructed new dispensaries, reorganized the health services, and decreased workers' contributions to the health budget.<sup>76</sup>

#### WAGES AND THE STRUGGLE TO EARN A LIVING

It was wages, however, which constituted the primary source of discontent. The state tried to maintain coal production as cheaply as possible, and since the cost of production materials could not be lowered, the only way to bring down costs was by paying lower wages.<sup>77</sup> In those years, the wages of compulsory miners were roughly one-quarter to one-fifth of the cost of a ton of coal,<sup>78</sup> a circumstance made possible only through state coercion. That was how the state was able to keep the sale price of coal low, the biggest purchaser being public enterprises. Down time for workers was unpaid, with wages calculated according to the

69. Kadri Yersel, *Madencilikte Bir Ömür Anılar Görüşler* (Istanbul, 1989), pp. 25–26.

70. Dosdoğru and Dosdoğru, *Sağlık Açısından*, pp. 13–20.

71. Ekrem Murat Zaman Private Collection, Zonguldak, 19 April 1944, "Tifüs Mücadelesi Hakkında".

72. Sabire Dosdoğru, "Zonguldak Kömür Havzasında Lekeli Tifo", *İÜ Tıp Fakültesi Mecmuası*, 9 (1946), p. 175.

73. "Mecburi Aşı", *Ocak Gazete*, 28 November 1942.

74. "Tifüs Mücadelesi Hakkında".

75. For the workers' complaints, see PMRA, 20 January 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/721.467.1; 20 April 1943, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/722.471.1; 28 August 1943, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/513.2061.2.

76. BUMH, EEKİM 1942 Yılı Umumi Murakabe Heyeti Raporu (n.p., 1943), p. 86.

77. PMRA, 3 December 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/722.470.1.

78. T.C. Ekonomi ve Ticaret Bakanlığı Ekonomi ve Ticaret Müdürlüğü, *Türkiye'de Kömür İstatistik Yıllığı 1941–1949* (Zonguldak, 1950), p. 22.

livelihood of a single person, without family.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, the burden of a family's subsistence was placed on women and agriculture. Compulsory workers followed two strategies concurrently to secure a livelihood: the first was to contrive to shorten the time they spent in the mines, while the second was to seek an increase in wages.

The length of rotation became one of the most important matters of contention. The compulsory labour system interrupted the flexible work strategies of the miners, so compulsory workers voiced their desire to return to the previous pattern, where they had been able to allocate a great part of their labour time to agriculture. At the 1940 RPP congress, workers demanded the rotation be scheduled as two months of agriculture and one month of mining. The government turned down their request,<sup>80</sup> and when they increased the rotation duration to forty-five days in 1942, the number of complaints doubled. The villagers declared that the forty-five-day work routine both hindered their agricultural activities and wore them out physically, and they demanded that it be shortened. The government categorically refused, stating that shorter periods reduced productivity.<sup>81</sup>

The compulsory workers pressed the government to increase wages too. They told the RPP deputies that wages were sufficient only to buy a pair of cowhide shoes, which fell apart in a month in the hostile conditions down the mines, and in fact they could barely feed themselves on the wages they received.<sup>82</sup> Deputies described the state of affairs as follows:

Workers have to work at the highly strenuous mining every other month for six months a year, which means they have to live on one month's pay for two months. It is not difficult to appreciate the hardships a family of at least three or four people has to suffer under such desolate circumstances. If they were able to cultivate their land in their villages, they would be in a slightly better situation.<sup>83</sup>

It was no coincidence that worker abscondence was more frequent in the harvest season, because workers who could not support their families with their annual mining incomes had to cling to their land. According to the deputies, worker escapes would continue until their wages became high enough to meet all their needs. Food shortages in the villages also increased absenteeism from mines. The deputies then suggested that workers be given corn instead of wages, and that various other facilities be provided.<sup>84</sup>

79. For the full text of the wage regulation, see Anil and Merey, *Türkiye'de Maden*, II, pp. 177–193.

80. PMRA, 20 April 1943, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/722.471.1.

81. PMRA, 2 December 1945, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/723.473.1.

82. *Ibid.*

83. PMRA, 20 January 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/721.467.1.

84. PMRA, 3 December 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/722.470.1.

Although the compulsory workers did the most strenuous and dangerous work underground, they were the group paid least among all coalfield workers.<sup>85</sup> Workers negotiated with the government for their wages at the RPP congresses. They claimed that wages were lower than those of the free workers in other sectors,<sup>86</sup> but the government stated that when social services were taken into account it was clear that they were getting pay equal to that of the workers in the other sectors, who were required to pay for their provisioning.<sup>87</sup> In fact, not only was the quality of the so-called social services very poor, they were not extended to all workers equally, as the EKI showed favouritism towards its own personnel, and to skilled workers. The government refused demands for equal access, stating that it was impossible to offer equal services to such a large number of workers.<sup>88</sup>

Although the duration of work in the mines was not shortened, the struggles of the compulsory workers over wages bore other fruit. Wages were increased at different intervals, although they never reached a level high enough for a household to subsist on them. RPP deputies and various inspection committees encouraged wage increases in order to break the workers' bond with agriculture, and to encourage them to adopt mining as a trade.<sup>89</sup> Accordingly, pay increases would also mitigate social discontent, and would make a good impression on workers in general. Nevertheless, the deputies pointed out that "the pay increase issue was after all a matter of cost of production".<sup>90</sup>

While the deputies' support for pay rises was based on a rationale regarding compulsory workers as a resource, to be used for maximum productivity with minimum trouble, workers' demands for higher wages were based on the right to survive. Perhaps as a result, instead of raising cash wages, the government began to count social services as part of workers' pay. After 1942, the EKI distributed free cloth, calico, corn, and kerosene to them,<sup>91</sup> and gave them the opportunity to buy basic consumer goods at reduced prices from EKI stores, using special tokens. However, since the workers needed money, they converted the new "payments in kind" into cash by selling the clothes, and the tokens, on the open market.<sup>92</sup>

85. PMRA, 20 January 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/721.467.1.

86. PMRA, 20 April 1943, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/722.471.1.

87. PMRA, 2 December 1945, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/723.473.1.

88. PMRA, 20 April 1943, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/722.471.1.

89. PMRA, 20 January 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/721.467.1. 1942; and ISA, EKİ, 1942 Yılı Hesaplanımızı Kontrol Eden Komisyon Raporu.

90. PMRA, 2 December 1945, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/723.473.1.

91. BUMH, 1944 Yılı Raporu, pp. 3, 197; PMRA, 3 August 1944, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/723.472.1.

92. "Muhterem Halkın ve Tüccarın ve Esnafın Nazarı Dikkatine", *Zonguldak Gazette*, 30 October 1943.

VILLAGES, FAMINE, AND THE STRUGGLE  
OVER CEREAL CROPS

The struggle for survival was not limited to the mines. In the villages too, families endured severe hunger. The heavily forested countryside of Zonguldak was less than ideal for agriculture, and for years the villagers had been importing their wheat from nearby provinces. However, scarcity and rising prices put an end to that possibility. When drought and floods destroyed corn crops, the women and children, alone in the villages, were left without bread. Workers therefore fled the mines to try to find grain for their families, but most returned empty handed and had to sell whatever they could from their homes to buy flour.<sup>93</sup> It was even rumoured that poverty-stricken, starving mountain villagers were hanging themselves from trees.<sup>94</sup> After putting aside the state's share of the grain, villagers were unable to survive on what was left, and were forced to consume the seed which should have been reserved for planting the following year.<sup>95</sup>

Coercive economic policies hindered the subsistence economy of the villages in a variety of ways. Because wages were inadequate, agriculture was the only source of subsistence for households, but compulsory work created a scarcity of labour in the villages, so women and children were forced to work harder in the fields.<sup>96</sup> The share of cereals taken by the state of itself endangered the subsistence of farming families, and it was taken at a price considerably below that prevailing on the free market. Local officials were in charge of estimating the state's share in the fields, so villagers were left to their mercy.<sup>97</sup> The officials used their power to punish those for whom they felt enmity, or simply took the opportunities for extortion. Moreover, as estimates were always made before the harvest, without allowing for contingencies such as drought or flood, crops were forever liable to fall short of original estimates. Even if the harvest was poor, the villagers would have to hand over the amount determined in the initial estimate. Even the deputies admitted the unfairness of it.<sup>98</sup>

Compulsory labour and the compulsory purchase of cereals created profound discontent in the villages. Villagers began to negotiate the terms of the purchase of cereals, and when RPP deputies visited they "enlightened" the villagers by explaining to them how the state was obliged to

93. PMRA, 3 December 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/722.470.1.

94. PMRA, 2 November 1945, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/723.473.1.

95. PMRA, 3 August 1944, catalogue no. 490.10.0/723.471.1.

96. PMRA, 2 November 1945, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/723.473.1.

97. For the compulsory purchase of cereals and the levying of soil product tax during the war period, see Pamuk, "War, State Economic Policies and Resistance", pp. 26–32.

98. PMRA, 3 December 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/722.470.1.

take a part of their crops in order to ensure peace in their own country while the rest of the world was at war. The villagers, on the other hand, complained that their produce was not enough even for their own families, and that after the state had taken its cut they did not have enough grain left to use as seed for the following year. The deputies tried to bolster the villagers' confidence in the state by assuring them that the state would never leave them hungry, and that they should not doubt that it would take any necessary precautions.<sup>99</sup>

The villagers made a series of definite demands to alleviate the burden of the compulsory purchases. For instance, they insisted the government provide them with wheat and corn seed.<sup>100</sup> They also negotiated the date of delivery of the government's share. Compulsory workers having no relatives other than their wives and children were unable to meet the deadline for delivery if it fell during the period they were working in the mines. So they asked for the period to be extended. Delivering the state's share to the district centre was also quite troublesome. People in remote villages had to spend days on the road to deliver their crops, and villagers claimed that the cost of a pair of rawhide sandals, which would be worn out by the journey, was more than the value of the five or ten kilograms of the crop they were delivering. They asked for free transport of their crops, and the deputies suggested to the government that they give the villagers a transport stipend.<sup>101</sup>

In 1943, the region was hit by drought. Villagers were forced to sell their livestock and other belongings to buy corn, and since the wages were far too little to pay the high prices compulsory workers were left destitute. One deputy expressed his fear of social unrest: "I am unable to placate the discontent in some regions."<sup>102</sup> The cause was obvious: hunger had taken over. The deputies' warnings had considerable influence on the government's decision to take certain measures, at last. In 1944, the corn taken from the villagers was counterbalanced by corn distributed to them, and as a result not only were the problems of transport and storage solved, the food shortage in the villages was alleviated too.<sup>103</sup>

However, social unrest in the villages doubled, with incidents of haylofts being burned and farm animals stolen becoming increasingly frequent. Villagers accused their headmen and the gendarmes of complicity with the thieves, some locals openly threatening RPP deputies with revolt. They said that they had lost confidence in the state to such an

99. *Ibid.*

100. PMRA, 20 January 1941, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/721.467.1.

101. PMRA, 3 December 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/722.470.1.

102. PMRA, 3 August 1944, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/723.472.1.

103. PMRA, 2 November 1945, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/723.473.1.

extent that they had even tried to get their own animals back by resorting to paying the thieves who had stolen them. In their words:

This lack of law and order has increased the pessimism among the people and some rebellious voices have begun increasing, saying things such as “The government is nonexistent, we have no protector.” At such a sensitive time as the world is passing through, the loss of faith of the people in the government even in such a small part of our country can shake national unity. This man must be punished [...]. The peace and harmony of the country have to be restored. Here we are expressing our complaints for the sake of our country. “The people’s voice is the voice of the truth.”<sup>104</sup>

#### ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NEW REGIME OF LABOUR CONTROL

By 1945, the compulsory workers had reached the end of their tether. During an inspection tour, RPP deputy Rebiî Barkın tried to persuade the angry villagers:

I told them how coal production is as important as military service, and that just as it would be meaningless for a soldier to complain of his military duty of defending the fatherland, it would be unacceptable for a self-sacrificing Turkish villager to find compulsory work burdensome, which indeed was as important as military service.<sup>105</sup>

But the villagers did not regard themselves as the self-sacrificing Turkish patriots the political elite imagined. The reality of their everyday experience conflicted with the official description of reality. Some villagers, said Barkın, especially the more or less literate village headmen,

[...] have been tolerating this compulsory labour for so many long years and as the war has already ended, it is necessary to abolish compulsory labour as well, and soon when the soldiers of the army are discharged it will not be fair to maintain compulsory labour in the way it used to be.<sup>106</sup>

The village headmen had made their appeals using the same rhetorical strategy by means of which the political elite justified compulsory labour: since the state treated them as soldiers and the war had now ended, they demanded to be discharged. In short, the village headmen appropriated the other half of the argument.

Barkın recognized that official language had lost its legitimacy. He admitted defeat as follows:

It is my job to speak the truth. [...]. In my conversations with the villagers sometimes I’m subjected to such questions and I receive such answers to some

104. PMRA, 3 August 1944, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/723.472.1.

105. PMRA, 2 November 1945, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/723.473.1.

106. *Ibid.*

of my words that after serious deliberation in the light of these dialogues, I have come to the conclusion that it would be right to address the villagers based on absolute truths. In respect of this conclusion, it is my duty and my obligation to state that the compulsory labour problem in the coalfield has to be taken up as soon as possible, considered seriously, and the necessary precautions should be taken urgently.<sup>107</sup>

In the end, the villagers imposed their truth on the political elite. They won the rhetorical battle. The rising discontent and subsequent struggles of the workers made compulsory labour unsustainable, and on 1 September 1947 it was abandoned.<sup>108</sup>

The officials recognized that a free labour system would make everything even more complicated,<sup>109</sup> and that the government must therefore form a new language of domination, based on consent rather than coercion. RPP deputies had already put forward a proposal in 1940. According to them, villagers sought to bind themselves to an *ağā* (local landlord) to meet their most urgent requirements whenever they were in need. In their words, “the state should act as the *ağā* of the mines, miners, and their villages. This would be the only solution to solve the labour question in a short time.”<sup>110</sup> To encourage villagers to be reliable workers, the administrative body of each mine district would look after the health, education, culture, and other needs of the villages. The villagers, whose needs would be met by the EKI, would be very grateful to their new *ağā*, and to establish the connection between villages and mines the deputies recommended a road network be built, so that workers could be transported to the mines in buses, or lorries.<sup>111</sup> The deputies then clearly appropriated the paternalist master–servant relationship, by recommending the binding of villages to mines by putting the social space of villages fully under the control of the state. As a result, the coalfield would become an all-inclusive company village. The paternalistic relations within the village were now to be transformed into industrial paternalism.<sup>112</sup>

To bind the villagers to the mines, the state had to reorganize the labour supply geographically and in terms of work hours and time generally. During the time of compulsory labour, projects were considered both for road networks and the permanent settlement of workers in company

107. *Ibid.*

108. BUMH, EEKİM 1947 Yılı Raporu (n.p., n.d.), p. 25.

109. BUMH, 1946 Yılı Raporu, p. 13.

110. PMRA, 20 January 1942, catalogue no. 490.1.0.0/721.467.1.

111. *Ibid.*

112 For a discussion on industrial paternalism, see Donald Reid, “Industrial Paternalism: Discourse and Practice in Nineteenth-Century French Mining and Metallurgy”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27 (1985), pp. 579–607.



Figure 3. Miners at a stadium, celebrating Republic Day, 1948.  
*From the author's private collection.*

villages.<sup>113</sup> The company village project was adopted in 1948 and applied to skilled and semiskilled workers, who comprised one-quarter of the total workforce. The road network project was adopted for workers from villages nearby, who constituted the majority of those who worked underground,<sup>114</sup> and a one-month roster was begun at the same time. To encourage regular attendance, the EKI offered incentives to rotational workers. Consequently, a local and temporal reorganization of the labour supply preserved the rural attachments of the underground workers.

The EKI established firm control over the labour market by involving traditional labour bosses in the official recruitment process.<sup>115</sup> It also prevented the growth of an independent labour movement. Although the Zonguldak Mine Workers' Union was established in 1947, it soon became an organ of EKI administration. Owing to the indifference of the

113. BUMH, 1944 Yılı Raporu, p. 139.

114. For the construction projects, see Ahmet Ali Özeken, "Türkiye Sanayinde İşçiyi Barındırma Problemi", *Sosyal Siyaset Konferansları* (Istanbul, 1950), III, pp. 103–130.

115. BUMH, EEKİM 1948 Yılı Raporu (n.p., n.d.), pp. 25–26, 53; EKİ, 1949 Senesi Faaliyet Raporu (n.p., n.d.), p. 33.

rotational workers and the predominant position of full-time workers in the union, it became a device for restraining organized labour movements rather than for promoting them.<sup>116</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study of relations between the single-party regime and the compulsory miners in the Zonguldak coalfield has thrown up some important observations on the forms of state domination of labour, and on the struggles by workers during the compulsory labour period. In an attempt to solve the problem of a scarcity of labour, the state implemented coercive and paternalistic forms of control over mineworkers concurrently, largely through a system of compulsory labour and a set of surveillance practices. Even though it is difficult to associate the single-party era in Turkey with a dynamic political life, a look at the day-to-day experience of the compulsory workers reveals the existence of a political sphere in which workers contended with the political elite for improved working and living conditions, and for government under the law. No doubt, the same sphere served the RPP too in its efforts to shape the collective mood of the people in accordance with its political, economic, and ideological wishes. However, as the political sphere constituted the people as citizens of the republic, the compulsory workers succeeded in making use of it to shape the ideas and practices of the political elite in a way that chimed with their requirements as families and individuals.

The compulsory workers created their own political agency by adapting the moral language of paternalism, in which the notion of justice played a pivotal role. At the junction of “livelihood”, “dignity”, and “necessity”, the workers’ ideas of justice determined what was acceptable, justifiable, and legitimate.<sup>117</sup> They interpreted the two-pronged appropriation of both their labour power and their cereal crops, and attendant oppression by the local bureaucracy, as quite obviously unjust, unfair, and illegitimate, because official practices relied on coercion, threatened their livelihoods, and violated the assumptions of the paternalism-deference equilibrium. The notion of justice naturally therefore imposed various duties on the benevolent “father figure” – the RPP. Accordingly, living and working conditions in mines and villages alike became a matter for contention, and workers managed to induce the state to perform its paternalistic responsibilities in return for their compliance.

116. Delwin A. Roy, “Labour and Trade Unionism in Turkey: The Ereğli Coalminers”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 12 (1976), pp. 125–172.

117. For justice as a moral ground for popular resistance, see Asef Bayat, “Uncivil Society: The Politics of the ‘Informal People’”, *Third World Quarterly*, 18 (1997), p. 59.

However, the moral assumption behind their struggles implied alternative social and political horizons too. While underlining the reciprocal nature of the relationship of paternalism and due deference if equilibrium were to be achieved, the workers subverted the dominant discourse in itself, to bring about a new equilibrium in the relationship between citizen and state, a relationship based on the language of rights. "Citizenship" became a term whose very meaning was contested, as the RPP sought to legitimize the exploitation of labour, and the compulsory labourers countered by legitimizing their right to its free exchange. Hand in hand with that went their right to a livelihood, and to lawful government.

Against the elite-centric perspective, which suggests that the transition in postwar Turkey to multiparty government and a welfare state were the results of a new, international conjuncture, and of internal conflict among the elite of the RPP, the struggles of compulsory workers reveal the contribution of the grassroots. Their contention with the ruling elite promoted both the democratic merits of society and the notion of citizenship.<sup>118</sup>

The contentious nature of the relations between the state and compulsory workers illustrates the dynamic relationship between class struggle and non-class identities. As examined here, even though citizenship appeared to be a non-class identity, in this case both the RPP and compulsory workers inflected it with meanings derived from the class struggles that went on beneath the surface of everyday life. It was through their class experience in both workplace and village that workers interpreted the concepts of popular sovereignty, constitutional government, and citizen welfare through which the Kemalist ruling elite wished to legitimize the single-party regime. Workers obliged the political elite to revise these notions until they were in harmony with the expectations of small peasants and workers. Although the compulsory workers cannot be seen as a working class, since class and class-consciousness are the products of class struggle,<sup>119</sup> their struggles contributed to the accumulation of experience which would facilitate the development of language, solidarity, and the aspirations of working people along class lines.

As the study illustrates, similarly to the making of class, the unmaking of class too is a product of class struggles. The use of unfree labour in the coalfield was no doubt part of a class struggle. Both the Ottoman state and the republican state put the processes of proletarianization and class formation in the coalfield under strict control. In both of the compulsory labour periods, the state established a stratified labour force made up of free and unfree labour, and arranged workers hierarchically in both work relations and the labour market. A sense of fragmentation initiated by the

118. Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London, 1993), pp. 299–315.

119. Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society", p. 151.

distinction between free and unfree labour was reinforced by divisions into temporary as against permanent jobs, and into surface as against underground workers, while suppression of labour organizations in the coalfields impeded the development of all other labour organizations and actions. It was not only the state, incidentally, but mining capital too which took advantage of the fragmented workforce, as during the single-party era mining enterprises largely utilized bonded labour, which was possible thanks to the contract system and piecework.

In the 1930s, although the state launched a programme of industrialization, its deep fear of the social and political consequences of proletarianization induced it to preserve the agrarian character of the coalfields. The 1939–1945 war provided the state with a convenient pretext on which to overcome labour shortages by instituting a scheme of compulsory labour. However, as the result of the workers' struggles, it became evident by 1947 that coercive means were no longer acceptable, so the government looked for new ways to curb the growth in the power of free labour in the coalfield. It facilitated the supply of labour from the miners' villages to the pits by building roads, and replaced patron and client relations in village communities with industrial paternalism.

However, although miners gained the right to free transactions for their labour power, they were not fully proletarianized. By ensuring adequate numbers of skilled full-time workers in company accommodation, inserting regional roots into the division of labour, containing the rotational underground workers in scattered villages, the state was able to keep the workforce stratified. Therefore, it curbed the proletarianization of the largest group of workers and inhibited the growth of organized labour movements.

The labour history of the Zonguldak coalfield contradicts the linear story lines of the stagist paradigm, based on the transition of the peasantry to the proletariat, unfree to free labour, and pre-capitalist loyalties to free transaction relations. The unfree labourers in the coalfield were neither the residuals of a pre-capitalist social formation, nor were they transitional labourers. In fact, in the history of capitalism unfree labour has always coexisted with several forms of labour, in Turkey and elsewhere.<sup>120</sup>

To comprehend the vast world of working people, and the heterogeneity of their experience, it is necessary to broaden the definition of "worker". Likewise, workers' struggles come in varied forms, as seen in this research, ranging from strikes to petitioning, survival strategies to rhetorical battles, local solidarities to the solidarities of the workplace.

120. For a discussion of the contemporaneity of unfree labour, see Jim Hagan and Andrew Wells, "Brassed-Off: The Question of Labour Unfreedom Revisited", *International Review of Social History*, 45 (2000), pp. 475–485.

However, it remains true that the various forms of struggle among workers do not automatically bring class consciousness or class actions. The complex relations between the forms of state domination over labour and workers' struggles in the history of the Zonguldak coalfield indicate the historicity and conditionality of class formation.