

“Do it voluntary to avoid coercion!”: Gendering “free” and coerced labour in mid-20th century Sweden

Numerous labour and gender history scholars have stressed the role of war and military readiness in the legitimization of coercion in the recruitment and detainment of labourers amongst citizens of late-modern states. While there is a large and growing body of research on the coercion of men for military service, less focus has been paid to other forms of the state’s coerced labour arrangements. The gendered aspects of such arrangements have also not received the attention needed to deepen our understanding of gender, war and free/unfree labour.

This paper seeks to advance such research by exploring gender and free/unfree labour through the 1939 Swedish Compulsory Labour Act (*Lagen om tjänsteplikt*). It will be argued that while the most imposing section of the act was never sanctioned for the female population, it was utilized as a means to shame and intimidate women into contracting themselves for various forms of civil and military labour—thus blurring the lines between free and unfree labour. Furthermore, drawing on Marcel van der Linden’s analytical framework for deconstructing coerced labour, I will identify three different “moments” in the practice of the Compulsory Labour Act, however also raising some tentative conclusions regarding the limits of van der Linden’s framework in relation to this particular case.

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