

Upcoming Course (Winter 2019)

Tentative Description

Proposed Title: A Case of Unjust Enrichment? Reflections on Forced Labour during World War II in Asia

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This four-part lecture provides a general overview of the mobilization and deployment of Asian labour alongside of Allied POWs in the service of the Japanese Empire's wartime economy during World War II, and links the quest for post war justice with regard to the atrocities committed against workers and POWs, to the broader development of human rights norms.

While labour mobilization was already a prominent feature of the Japanese Empire in the 1930s, at the height of the war, and when its own labour reserves were used up, the Japanese government intensified its forced recruitment of labourers. Japan's deployment of forced labour ran into the millions, and that extreme labour conditions, harsh corporal punishment and scant regard for workers' lives and health led to massive and often unrecorded deaths.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course,

- participants will have a basic grasp of the different types and forms of forced labour mobilized and deployed by the Japanese Military during WWII, as well as be able to reflect on the broader significance of such labour to the Japanese wartime economy;
- participants will have a better understanding of the broader historical context of wartime labour, and how the atrocities during WWII influenced the framing of labour standards under a human rights frame.

Day 1 Overview

The first lecture begins with a short examination of origins of the Japanese Empire's use of non-Japanese labour during a period of rapid economic and territorial expansion, and then draws attention to the scope and scale of labour by POWS civilians for Japan's wartime economy.

Day 2 Piecing together Stories from Survivors

The forced labour as well as the deaths and maltreatment of Prisoners of War during WWII in Asia were one of the more prominently litigated atrocities at the historic Tokyo Trials. Former POWs mainly testified about their own experiences, but some also spoke about the civilian Rōmusha they worked alongside of during the war. Historians note that compared to the POW experiences, there is a dearth of evidence regarding the experiences of the civilian workers.

The second lecture examines primary sources about the forced labour of Asian civilians, drawing from POW memoirs and interviews, Allied reports (including intercepted information from the Japanese military), and other survivors' interviews.

Day 3 Gender/Labour in the Japanese Wartime Economy

On one hand, Japanese women comprised over 36% (and much later in the war, up to 44%) of the Japanese labour force. Just like for women in the West, the wartime economy opened up opportunities for women in the formal labour force, particularly in industries that were previously closed to them

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(weapons technology, manufacturing and other mechanized occupations). On the other hand, Japan also required women who were otherwise consigned to sexual slavery, to perform, more often than not, unpaid domestic labour. The third lecture examines how gender norms figured in the deployment and mobilization of female labour in the service of both the Japanese wartime economy and the domestic needs of the Japanese Military.

Day 4 Changing International Law Norms on Labour: Shifts in the Interwar and Post Second World War Period

This lecture focuses on the history of the International Labour Organization (ILO) from its inception in 1919 to the postwar period, and focuses on how the debate on forced labour shifted from the interwar to the post war period, from a colonial phenomenon to a substantive human rights issue.

As the only international organization within the UN system to date, which allows the participation of non-governmental actors, the ILO's role and importance in shaping the global discourse on labour standards cannot be overlooked.