

Survival in the 'Crisis Era' 1914 – 1950: Flashpoint Migration

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The period in Europe spanning from 1914 to 1950 was marked by war, political conflicts, authoritarian rule, as well as the persecution, murder, and dispossession of millions of people during the Nazi period. The years lasting from the eve of World War I to the aftermath of World War II were thus a period of recurring economic crises. People who were poor, unemployed, or socially disadvantaged were especially challenged to develop strategies in order to secure their own survival and that of their relatives. Many of these precariously living people were therefore extremely mobile in a twofold sense: They did not only leave their places of residence to find subsistence elsewhere, they also migrated between different opportunities of acquisition and sustenance. People belonging to the so-called "underclass" in city and countryside thereby encountered various conditions and possibilities of organizing their livelihoods, dependent also on factors such as sex, age, and origin. These conditions were moreover related to new regulations regarding citizenship and right of domicile, the introduction and development of state social security systems, as well as new laws and infrastructures for the organization of the labor market.

The authorities were invested in regulating and controlling immigration and emigration, in fighting rural flight, and in curbing the employment of vagrants as well as of agricultural or domestic workers in industrial employment. Farmhands, day laborers, and domestic workers did not only switch between different employers, but also combined – simultaneously or consecutively – different livelihoods, crossing interior and national boundaries, and migrating between urban and rural spaces.

The various forms of migration undertaken by those active in agricultural or domestic labor and their manifold transitions to other activities and livelihoods still require systematic examination. This sub-project examines the livelihood strategies and possibilities of (occasional) farmhands and domestic workers in Lower Austria and Vienna in the context of new laws and official measures. This is based on a survey of a comprehensive and heterogeneous source base (such as testimonies, official and legal documents from the local to the national level, documents of employment agencies and the migration agency, and contemporary political and scholarly publications).