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Abstract: Military labour between XV and XX century

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From preparation to practice – Military labour in Finland 1920-1944

In this paper I analyze the Finnish case of military labour in the WWII and how it was planned in the interwar-period. The focus is on the “not only soldiers” aspect of the military labour. The paper makes way for discussing the interwar preparations, the transnational aspects of it, and what kind of military labour was used in Finland during the Second World War.

The analysis of Finnish case relies on archival sources, whereas most of interwar preparations transnational aspects are acquired through research literature. The transnational aspect during the interwar-period is examined for example through the idea of mobile actors.

Finland did not take directly part to the Great War while being an autonomous grand duchy of imperial Russia. It declared independent 1917 but was torn apart by civil war in 1918, offspring of the Great War. In the 1920s and 1930s, also economic war preparedness got attention. The Economic War Council was founded in 1929 and it planned the basis of distribution of labour during crisis. Its focus had two sides, war industry and agriculture. Preparations had transnational aspects, which will be discussed on the paper. For example, collaboration with Sweden was on regular basis. Connections with Germany will also be discussed.

In Finland’s point of view, World War II included three separate wars, the Winter War (1939-1940) alone against the Soviet Union and then the Continuation War (1941-1944), alongside with Germany, against mutual enemy, Soviet Union. The last fight was against the Germany, the Lapland war (1944-45) after peace treaty with Soviet Union in September 1944.

In this paper, three categories of labour are found: the labour service men, prisoners of war (PoW), and the so called “shaken up”, mentally injured soldiers. Based on law, the labour service was obligatory, and there were circa 100 000 labour service men in Finland participating in fortification works under military command. The use of PoW’s as military labour was an age-old and international phenomenon. The “shaken up” soldiers, whose labour was put into use, was clearly an improvisation. The main tasks of all three groups were manual labour, spade and pickaxe.

In the paper proposed, I will first consider the preparations for military labour during the interwar-period and examine its transnational aspects. After that I will turn to the WWII and analyze briefly the three abovementioned categories of labour. The purpose is to raise questions and discussion on national and transnational aspects of military labour on the basis of this paper.