

A brief history of mining in Belgian and Dutch Limburg

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In contrast to the surrounding mining regions in Wallonia and neighbouring countries, where coal extraction has been practiced since the Middle Ages or earlier, coal mining in the Limburg Campine (B) is exclusively a 20th-century phenomenon. Coal production was confined to a period of 75 years, from 1917 to 1992. During this time, one-third of Belgium's coal was extracted, facilitated by seven mines.

In contrast, Dutch Limburg has a more extensive mining history. In the valley of the Worm, a river on the Dutch-German border, coal seams naturally surfaced, making extraction relatively straightforward. Over the centuries, numerous small-scale private mines, family-owned operations, and abbey mines emerged in this Worm Valley. Prior to 1900, coal mining in Limburg was primarily concentrated around Kerkrade and its immediate surroundings. As coal gained importance, particularly as a fuel for the burgeoning industrial sector, the search for coal extended to other areas, e.g. Heerlen. New, larger mining enterprises emerged. Initially these were privately owned, but the Dutch government soon claimed the remaining concessions, leading to the establishment of state-owned mines. By 1927, twelve major coal mines were operational in the South of Limburg (NL).

The legacy of coal mining left an indelible mark on both Limburg regions. Sparsely populated, agrarian areas rapidly transformed into multicultural garden cities centred around large industrial complexes. In this overview, I examine the organizational, socioeconomic, and spatial developments in both Belgium and the Netherlands. Particularly, I focus on the challenges posed by labour shortages and the solution implemented: the recruitment of labour migrants and the differences and similarities between the two Limburg regions.