

The Moroccan presence in Belgium

Although the sixtieth anniversary of the Labour Agreement between Morocco and Belgium is being officially commemorated, the history of the immigrant population from the Maghreb goes back much further, to the end of the 19th century. During the Great War, many of the first Moroccans gave their lives on Belgian soil and some survivors remained in the country after the war. By 1930, more than a thousand Moroccans were working in the coal mines. Tens of thousands of Moroccans fought the Nazis in the Second World War. Most of the 2,400 infantrymen killed in the Battle of Gembloux are buried in Chastre Cemetery.

In 1945, Belgium brought in foreign workers, mainly Italian, to help rebuild the country. This workforce stopped coming after the Bois du Cazier mining disaster in 1956. Belgium then turned to Morocco to keep its industry running at full capacity during the “Thirty Glorious Years” of the post-war boom. The arrival of the Moroccan workers, made official by the 1964 Labour Agreement, also helped to repopulate Belgium. When they arrived in Belgium, 90% of Moroccan migrants were unmarried. The demographic policy of integration and assimilation based on family reunification aimed to encourage them to stay in Belgium, by dissuading them from finding work in other industrial countries.

As well as immigration from Morocco, some Moroccans were attracted across the border (particularly from France) by better wages and working conditions, and a Social Security system that protected them: social benefits, family allowance – including for family members who had stayed in Morocco – as well as retirement and survivor's pensions. Nonetheless, in actual fact, **only 3,500 Moroccans were directly recruited via the 1964 Agreement.**

Their conditions were precarious and sometimes very poor, although they would later improve thanks to information campaigns, training programmes, etc. During the Golden Sixties, more than 125,000 Belgian work permits were issued, but always for low-skilled jobs.

The gradual closure of the coal mines led to the recruitment of Moroccans being suspended from 1967 onwards, and it officially ended in 1974. At the same time, the government regularised the status of 9,000 foreign residents and recognised the Islamic faith.

By celebrating the anniversaries of the 1964 Agreement, researchers and the Moroccan diaspora have shed light on the history of Moroccan workers in Belgium. A rich and challenging history bearing witness to journeys both unique and collective, between uprooting and putting down roots.