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**Contracts under Duress. Work Documents as a Matter and Means of Negotiation. (Habsburg Monarchy/Austria in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century)**

In the Habsburg Monarchy of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, employment booklets for labourers and servants were mandatory documents for legal work, for travelling and for proving one's identity. Unlike other European countries which abolished such documents, the Habsburg Monarchy extended this obligation to ever more categories of wage labourers during this era. This paper addresses these documents as a symbol and as a means for establishing, negotiating and enforcing work contracts. Government authorities and employers' organisations viewed work booklets as an indispensable precondition of control, as well as to establish trust and prohibit breach of contract. It was also argued that these papers – as certificates of work and qualifications – helped people in their search for work. However, organisations of labourers and servants described these documents as mere symbols of humiliation and of legal inequality, indeed as a "sign of slavery". Multiple conflicts are recorded concerning the contents of work references. Employers were accused of withholding documents to enforce a contract or to provide themselves a form of security for wage advances and debts. Individual or collective breach of contract was a violation of the trade law but – with respect to workers – also a criminal offense. Besides fines, monetary compensation, or imprisonment were possible. A person could likewise be forced to return to his/her workplace. Whereas the political fronts and positions seem clear, an investigation of the practices involved allows us to differentiate the diverse ways in which legal requirements were used, abused, resisted and neglected.