

ARTICLE

Foreign Workers in Czechoslovakia in 1945–1950

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Abstract

Foreign workers were a common feature in the economy of postwar Czechoslovakia in various periods of the second half of the twentieth century. This article focuses on foreign labor practices during the first economic plans, namely the two-year plan and the first five-year plan between 1947 and 1950. The number of foreign workers at this time didn't exceed twenty thousand persons and their stays in the country were, with only individual exceptions, short. Workers, who found employment in Czechoslovak agriculture and industry in this period, came from different countries including neighboring Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania, but also from Italy. Recruitment of other groups such as workers from Hungary, the Netherlands, or even China is also considered by the article. These foreign laborers worked in Czechoslovakia under various conditions depending on their methods of recruitment and contracting, the duration of their employment, and other important factors. The basic question this article aims to answer is what the role of *Gastarbeit* was in Czechoslovakia's communist economic policy. It also examines the motivations of countries that sent workers as well as those of the workers themselves. Finally, the article also attempts to analyze the opportunities and limits of these workers' strategies in the Czechoslovak labor market.

Keywords: foreign workers; labor policy; planned economy; postwar Czechoslovakia

The postwar influx of foreign workers into the labor markets of France, Belgium, Germany, and subsequently many other Western European countries became an important factor in the development of their societies and economies and continues to have a significant impact on their character today. This is also reflected in the long-term and multilayered historical research on this topic.¹ Less well known is the fact that the phenomenon of *Gastarbeit* also featured on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in a world whose basic characteristics included closedness and isolation, distrust of foreigners, and a general restriction on foreign traffic. Existing research has looked more closely at later cases of foreign workers from friendly countries staying in East Germany (GDR) or Czechoslovakia as part of the so-called international aid between socialist states, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. While the employment of foreign workers in the former East Germany has been quite widely researched during the last two decades,² Czech interest in the topic dates only to the last few years.³

¹See Leo Lucassen, David Feldman, Jochen Oltmer, "Immigrant Integration in Western Europe, Then and Now," in *Paths of Integration. Migrants in Western Europe (1880–2004)*, eds. Lucassen, Feldman, and Oltmer (Amsterdam, 2006), 7–23; Andrew P. Geddes, "Analysing the Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe," in Geddes, *The Politics of Migration and Immigration in Europe* (London, 2003), 14–17; Jan Adamec, "Hosté, kteří zůstali. Jak hlad po pracovní síle změnil charakter poválečné západní Evropy?" *Paměť a dějiny* 15 (2021): 82–94.

²However, in contrast to Czechoslovakia, the employment of foreigners in East Germany dates back to the beginning of the 1960s at the earliest. See Klaus J. Bade, *Europa in Bewegung. Migration vom späten 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 2000), 338–39; Sandra Gruner-Domić, "Zur Geschichte der Arbeitskräftemigration in die DDR. Die bilateralen Verträge zur Beschäftigung ausländischer Arbeiter (1961–1989)," *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* 32, no. 2 (1996): 204–30; Dennis Kuck, "Für den sozialistischen Aufbau ihrer Heimat? Ausländische Vertragsarbeitskräfte in der DDR," in *Fremde und Fremd-Sein in der DDR. Zu historischen Ursachen der Fremdenfeindlichkeit in Ostdeutschland*, eds. Jan C. Behrends, Thomas Lindenberger, and Patrice G. Poutrus (Berlin, 2003), 271–81; Dagnara Jajeśniak-Quast, "'Proletarische Internationalität' ohne Gleichheit. Ausländische Arbeitskräfte in ausgewählten sozialistischen Großbetrieben," in *Ankunft – Alltag – Ausreise. Migration und Interkulturelle Begegnung in der DDR-Gesellschaft*, eds. Christian Th. Müller and Patrice G. Poutrus (Cologne, 2005), 267–95; Ann-Judith Rabenschlag, *Völkerfreundschaft nach Bedarf. Ausländische Arbeitskräfte in der Wahrnehmung von Staat und Bevölkerung der DDR* (Stockholm, 2014); Almut Zwengel, ed., *Die 'Gastarbeiter' der DDR. Politischer Kontext und Lebenswelt* (Berlin, 2011).

³An important case study analyzes the employment of Polish women in Czechoslovak textile factories in 1970s and 1980s: Ondřej Klipa, *Majstr a Małgorzata: Polky v továrnách ČSSR* (Prague, 2021); see also idem, "Polish Women Workers in

In this article, we will show that Czechoslovakia was one of the European pioneers of state-controlled recruitment of workers abroad immediately after World War II. Studies dealing with Western Europe or those focused on the later Soviet bloc have hardly noticed the existence of guest workers in Czechoslovakia in this early period.⁴ We will focus primarily on the state's efforts to obtain labor abroad on terms favorable to Czechoslovakia, but we will also show the ways in which workers tried to use the problems of the Czechoslovak labor market to their advantage and to evade existing regulations. Furthermore, we will explain how the Czechoslovak labor market gradually lost its ability to attract and exploit foreign workers in the era of the emerging planned economy and communism. Finally, we will try to answer the question of why the employment of foreigners in Czechoslovakia remained limited in comparison with Western Europe, particularly Germany. In doing so, this article notes common and divergent aspects of early Cold War labor policies.

Problems of the Postwar Labor Market and the Employment of Foreigners

The postwar reconstruction of Czechoslovakia drew tens of thousands of foreign workers, mainly from other East European countries, namely Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland, but also from Italy. The original plans were even more extensive. In the early 1950s, however, the hiring of foreign workers ran into the economic and political limits of the communist dictatorship. Like many other countries, Czechoslovakia faced far-reaching changes in the labor market after World War II. The reconstruction of the economy, damaged by the war and Nazi occupation, gradually became oriented toward the development of heavy industry under a centrally planned economy. Moreover, all this took place at a time when approximately 30 percent of the population of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia—the Sudeten Germans—were expelled from the territory of the state during the two immediate postwar years. Their expulsion had not only a quantitative but also a structural impact. Tens of thousands of Czech people disappeared practically overnight from the least attractive professions, taking the better places of the expelled German inhabitants. Agriculture and mining, industries crucial to the basic functioning of the state, were the most affected. Labor shortages became a staple feature of subsequent economic development, forcing the introduction of a wide range of regulatory measures and the construction of an extensive administrative labor policy apparatus. Labor market management, referred to as national labor mobilization, included various forms of permanent or temporary, voluntary, or forced labor deployment.⁵

Practically from the outset, postwar labor planners envisaged the arrival of a certain number of workers from abroad. As early as 4 January 1946, the government decided to open negotiations with Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Italy. Italy, which had become the first important source of labor for Western European labor markets, was also the first to find itself in the crosshairs of the Czechoslovak negotiators.⁶ In proposals from June 1946, the arrival of labor from abroad was recommended under four conditions: (1) the deployment of foreigners would be gradually replaced by mechanization, especially in the production of bricks; (2) foreigners were to be employed mainly in investment projects of a permanent nature; (3) the payment structure was to be advantageous to the Czechoslovak Republic; and (4) either highly qualified specialists or the opposite, unqualified auxiliary labor were to be recruited.⁷ None of these conditions was ultimately fulfilled.

Czechoslovakia: What Made Them to Come?" *Český lid* 98 (2011): 31–52. In 2021, a thematic collection of articles entitled *Gastarbeitři v Československu 1945–1989* also appeared in the journal *Paměť a dějiny*, see <https://www.ustrcr.cz/publikace/pamet-a-dejiny-4-2021/>.

⁴An exception being Michele Colucci's dissertation on Italian labor emigration, which also includes a short but very stimulating chapter on Italian workers in Czechoslovakia, based on Italian documents: "Forza lavoro in movimento l'Italia e l'emigrazione in Europa, 1945–1957" (Ph.D. diss., Università degli studi della Tuscia di Viterbo, 2000), 212–22. Published as Michele Colucci, *Storia dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia. Dal 1945 ai nostri giorni* (Rome, 2018).

⁵Veronika Steinová, *Pracovní poměr v letech 1945–1965* (Ostrava 2019); Tomáš Dvořák, "Migration and Managing the Labour Market in Czechoslovakia 1945–1953," in *Forced Migration and Large-Scale Settlement in Modern European History*, eds. Tim Buchen and Gerhard Wolf (forthcoming).

⁶Národní archiv Praha (NA), fond Ministerstvo práce a sociální péče (MPSP), box 417, inv. 861, sign. 2350, correspondence between Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Social Welfare in April 1946 on the case of the Agreement with Italy.

⁷*Ibid.*, box 60, inv. 70, sign. 1216, proposal for the mobilization of the workforce submitted by the IVth department of the Ministry of Social Welfare on 12 June 1946.

In the first phase, the government assumed that the provision of labor would be part of peace treaties with some of the defeated states. These ideas centered on Italy and Hungary in particular, and Romania was also considered. On the other hand, Bulgaria was excluded at the outset from this set of states.⁸ International political realities, however, quickly showed that these assumptions were false and negotiations with Bulgaria, Romania, and Italy were then conducted on the principle of equal partnership.

Agreements with Bulgaria, Romania, Italy, and Poland

Bulgarians became the largest group of postwar guest workers in Czechoslovakia. The treaty between Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia was signed on 16 September 1946. Preliminary negotiations envisaged the recruitment of up to 20,000 workers to be deployed in Czechoslovak agriculture. In 1946–48, according to official statistics, a total of 11,123 Bulgarian workers came to the country. As late as 1950, 2,517 Bulgarian workers were still working in Czechoslovakia; however, against the terms of the original contract, more than 2,000 of them obtained employment in industry.⁹ Some Bulgarians came with entire families and temporarily participated in the re-colonization of some outlying depopulated settlements in the former Sudetenland, including as workers in the so-called mountain pasture cooperatives.¹⁰

The second largest group of foreign workers came from Romania. According to the agreement on the recruitment of Romanian agricultural workers signed on 23 January 1947, there were supposed to be 15,000, but even this number could not be met. That year, a total of 8,728 persons arrived in Czechoslovakia, 7,597 of them workers. The maximum number of Romanians mentioned in the sources is 9,800. In 1948, mutual dissatisfaction, together with political tensions, led to the rapid departure of a large number of Romanians, with 2,000 workers leaving even before the expiration of the contract. However, the situation gradually stabilized, and a certain number of Romanian workers remained in Czechoslovakia. In 1950, the Czechoslovak side took measures to end the entire scheme, but not all Romanians wanted to return home and some refused to sign up for the last transports. The government allowed at least 200 men, who in the meantime had married Czech women, to remain in the country.¹¹

In the case of Italian workers, internal Czechoslovak documents mention the possibility of bringing as many as 100,000 [!] migrants to Czechoslovakia.¹² Within the Italian emigration movement, as early as 1946 there were reportedly 1,500 people registered in Padua alone who were interested in traveling to Czechoslovakia. The Italian-Czechoslovak agreement on emigration was not signed in Rome until 10 February 1947. It set the framework for the recruitment of only 5,000 Italian workers. Some arrived in mass transports, but others entered employment individually. In the end, only 1,228 Italians arrived in Czechoslovakia in 1947, and their number reached only 1,352 in the following year.¹³ Unlike other interstate agreements, the agreement with Italy provided precise quotas for specific industries in addition to the projected 2,000 agricultural workers: 600 for underground mines, 1,400 for open-pit coal

⁸Ibid., box 417, inv. 861, sign. 2350, correspondence between the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from April 1946.

⁹NA, fond Ministerstvo pracovních sil (MPrS), box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, Ministry of Labor for the Social-Political Commission of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party on 14 March 1950 on the case of the deployment of Bulgarian workers.

¹⁰Cf. Tamara Nováková, "Horská pastvinářská družstva ve východních Krkonoších 1945–1949," *Opera Corcontica* 55 (2019): 5–63; Milada Ryšánková, "Pozůstatky bulharské etnické skupiny v Podkrkonoší (okres Trutnov)," in *Materiály k problematice etnických skupin na území ČSSR sv. 8*. (Prague, 1988), 89–96.

¹¹NA, MPrS, box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, information about Romanian agricultural workers in Czechoslovakia on 8 July 1948 and more documents in dossier, including the undated holograph notes; NA, fond Úřad předsednictva vlády – Tajná spisovna (ÚPV-T), box 19, sign. 25/2, Information of the Ministry of Social Welfare about the Romanian agricultural workers from 15 July 1948 and documents including the transcript of the interstate agreement.

¹²This original idea also appeared in internal documents among Italian government politicians, Colucci, *Forza lavoro*, 213.

¹³NA, fond Ústřední výbor KSČ-Hospodářská rada (ÚV KSČ-HR), vol. 3, item 48, Report to protocol of Economy Council of 6 January 1949, sheet 13; NA, f. MPSP, box 417, inv. 861, sign. 2350, Correspondence about the negotiations with Italy from the period 1946–1948.

quarries, 500 for the railways, and 500 for quarries and kaolin mining. According to Michele Colucci, this kaolin also supplied the Italian ceramics industry, and the Italian miners in Czechoslovakia participated on the basis of special negotiations.¹⁴ As late as 1948, the authorities reportedly noted a keen interest among employers for Italians to move to Czechoslovakia. Although the political changes in Czechoslovakia meant a gradual end to the influx of foreign workers, a number of Italians appear to have established long-term roots in the country. In 1949, after the extension of their contracts, 980 Italians remained. In the assessment of the central authorities, they represented “a cadre of proven and conscious workers, few of whom are likely to return to Italy.”¹⁵

The Polish agricultural workers who arrived in Czechoslovakia in late 1948 were primarily to take care of the livestock during the winter. Here too recruitment remained far below original expectations. Between 22 November and 20 December, 2,450 Polish workers arrived in Czechoslovakia in twenty-three transports. In early March of 1949, according to the Ministry of Labor, a total of 3,914 Polish workers were assigned to agriculture. This marked the peak of the recruitment of Poles into agriculture. However, agricultural workers were only one group of Poles who found employment in the Czechoslovak labor market after the war. As we will see below, of much greater importance were the workers in the industrial hub of Ostrava, who commuted from their homes on the Polish side of the border.¹⁶

Recruitment from Additional Countries and Individual Employment of Foreigners

Bulgaria, Romania, Italy, and Poland were not the only countries considered as possible recruitment sources of workers for Czechoslovakia. In December 1946, an offer from the Netherlands attracted the attention of the authorities, but it did not meet Czechoslovakia’s needs. Instead of cheap laborers for agriculture or mines, the Netherlands offered engineers or even people interested in private farms.¹⁷ The government of Argentina also inquired about working conditions for foreigners through official diplomatic channels in the summer of 1947.¹⁸ In March 1947, the Prague branch of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee approached the government with an offer to arrange permanent or temporary employment for “a certain number” of Jewish refugees from the East, mainly originating from Poland, who numbered about 200,000 in occupied Germany. The Czechoslovak Ministry of the Interior was strongly opposed to the admission of “refugees coming specifically from Poland and from the Eastern countries in general” based on “common knowledge that these refugees already after the First World War constituted an extremely undesirable element for the internal political situation in our country.”¹⁹ The Ministry claimed that war refugees from the East had “tried to stay here, built up profitable jobs or professions with outside help, and then moved exclusively in a German environment, never became acquainted with the Czech people and multiplied the total number of persons of German nationality in the country by their numbers.” It predicted that, if admitted, these people would “soon abandon their manual labor and seek other, easier sources of livelihood, whether by legal or illegal means, to the detriment of the Czech nation. This would certainly turn them back into an element undesirable from the point of view of public safety and order.”

The traditional police-bureaucratic tone of the reply illustrates the fact that the openness of Czechoslovak labor policy towards foreigners had obvious limits. In this case, the postwar paradigm of ethnic homogeneity was strongly in force. With Jews, the Ministry recalled the negative reception

¹⁴Colucci, *Forza lavoro*, 217–18.

¹⁵Ibid.; NA, MPrS, box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, dossier Itálie, Information for the minister on 4 December 1948.

¹⁶NA, MPSP, box 454, inv. 990, list of arranged Polish workers in agriculture dated 4 March 1949.

¹⁷NA, fond Úřad předsednictva vlády-Generální sekretariát hospodářské rady (ÚPV-GSHR), box 187, inv. 347, fol. 438, Holland’s offer of workforce.

¹⁸NA, MPSP, box 424, inv. 863, sign. 2359, Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the case of the question from the Argentinian chargé d’affaires on 25 March 1947.

¹⁹Ibid., Interdepartmental correspondence between the Ministries of Social Welfare, Foreign Affairs, Industry and the Interior from the period April–July 1947, here specifically a letter from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated 15 May 1947.

of Eastern Jewish refugees during World War I and the interwar and immediate postwar period. To this it added the allegation that Jews tended to adopt a German cultural orientation in Czechoslovakia, and it also cited the already unsettled situation in immigration traffic. The Ministry of Industry likewise restricted immigration to a restrictive list of demanding industrial occupations, a move probably intended to discourage potential applicants, and added the caveat that due to the housing shortage, Jewish workers could only be accommodated in camps.²⁰ Concerns about the formation of concentrated groups of foreigners or potential minorities can also be detected in proposals put forward in the negotiations with the Soviet Union to increase uranium production. Records include, but without much clarity, mention of the planned arrival of tens of thousands of workers from Bulgaria, Romania, or the Soviet Union in the uranium mining area.²¹ Another Soviet proposal of October 1948, to procure 5,000 workers for the Jáchymov mines from the Soviet Occupation Zone in Germany, did not materialize, nor did Czechoslovak probes into the recruitment of 2,000 Bulgarians for two years in 1950 in Sofia lead to a concrete result.²²

In addition to labor recruited under interstate agreements, evidence also exists of foreigners who found employment as individuals. These represented only small numbers of people within the district labor offices (hereafter referred to as OÚOP).²³ Specific exceptions included hundreds of Greek refugees spread over different parts of the country and dozens of released German prisoners of war, employed on fixed-term contracts in uranium mining.²⁴ For example, the OÚOP in Pilsen registered seventy-five individual foreigners employed in its district for September 1948.²⁵ Table 1.

To illustrate the dynamics of the labor market and the diversity of professions, we will use the example of the OÚOP in Mariánské Lázně, a spa environment with traditionally more intense foreign traffic. Here, in October 1948, the district hired a Canadian carpentry helper, two French plumbers, an Austrian maid, and an American radio technician.²⁶ We are unable to say whether these and other cases involved family members of Czechoslovak citizens, members of the migration and refugee waves unleashed by World War II, or employees of foreign companies. However, the position of Czechoslovak labor policy toward individual job applicants was rather reserved or even dismissive. In early 1947, for example, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, in view of the possible disruption of organized recruitment, recommended not granting individual visas to foreign job applicants from Bulgaria, Romania, or Greece without prior approval. Nor did the sporadic applications of foreign admirers of “popular democracy” from, for example, Switzerland or Sweden, arouse enthusiasm.²⁷

Social and Economic Realities of *Gastarbeit* in Czechoslovakia

All of these interstate agreements defined quite precisely the conditions of employment for foreign workers. Workers were hired based on individual employment contracts with a specific employment

²⁰Ibid., here a letter from the Ministry of Industry to the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs and Social Welfare dated 18 June 1947.

²¹Tomáš Dvořák, “Jáchymovské doly a vznik pracovních táborů v souvislostech politiky řízení pracovních sil v poválečném Československu,” in *Jáchymov: jeviště bouřlivého století*, ed. Klára Pinerová (Prague, 2018), 142–159, here 144; by comparison, the influx of Italians to the border regions of France raised fears about the emergence of an undesirable Italian minority and potential irredentists as early as 1946, see Adamec, “Hosté, kteří zůstali,” 83.

²²Archiv DIAMO národní podnik (DIAMO), fond Jáchymovské doly Jáchymov národní podnik (JD), box 297, letter to Klement Gottwald of 11 October 1948; Ibid., MPrS, box 49, inv. 90, sign. 114a, sheet 508, discussion of the possibility of recruiting 2,000 workers for Jáchymovské doly held on 5 June 1950.

²³Okresní úřad ochrany práce, literally: District labor protection office.

²⁴Tomáš Dvořák, “Těžba uranu versus “očista” pohraničí. Německé pracovní síly v Jáchymovských dolech na přelomu čtyřicátých a padesátých let 20. století,” *Soudobé dějiny* 12 (2005): 638–46.

²⁵NA, fond Zemský úřad ochrany práce Praha (ZUOP-P), box 20, situation report of the OÚOP Plzeň for September 1948.

²⁶Ibid., box 21, situation reports of the OÚOP Hradec Králové and OÚOP Karlovy Vary for October 1948 and situation report of the OÚOP Mariánské Lázně for November 1948.

²⁷NA, MPSP, box 424, inv. 863, sign. 2359, correspondence between the Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Czechoslovak Embassy in Rome from the period January–March 1947, rejection of the application of the Swiss participant of the brigade in Lidice for employment in the Kladno mines of 24 November 1947; *ibid.*, box 417, i. č. 861, sign. 2350, application of Swedish young communists to immigrate to the Czechoslovak Republic of 26 December 1948.

Table 1. Demographic Breakdown of Foreign Workers in Pilsen

Nationality	Men	Women
Russian	2	–
Yugoslav	8	2
Austrian	6	–
Romanian	1	1
Polish	11	4
Italian	6	–
Greek	2	–
French	7	2
Dutch	3	–
Bulgarian	1	1
Palestinian	1	–
Belgian	3	1
Indian	1	–
Hungarian	–	1
Without nationality	10	1
Total	62	13

relationship for one year, with the possibility of extensions. In the case of Polish workers, these were only six-month contracts. The contracts also regulated workers' working conditions and accommodations. The possible provision of work clothes and shoes, which were generally scarce commodities, sometimes played an important motivational role during recruitment. Transportation costs to and from the country and its organization in the form of mass rail transports were also contractually covered. Essential parts of the agreements were the rules for transferring part of the wages that workers wished to send home and for buying goods on the Czechoslovak market still regulated by the rationing system. In this the government pursued the interests of its own exports and at the same time sought to conserve foreign exchange. Thus, wages were often paid in goods for which the partner state paid workers in their home currency. For example, as we have seen, in the case of Italy it was coal or kaolin.²⁸ Working conditions and wage rates for Romanians were set in the same way as for domestic agricultural workers, but Italians or Poles received different benefits.²⁹ In retrospect, the contracts proved economically disadvantageous for Czechoslovakia and the use of foreign workers was often not effective in a planned economy.

The workers themselves were also generally disappointed. Their expectations of lucrative wages and consumer opportunities went largely unfulfilled. In particular, agricultural wage labor was by far the least attractive occupation under Czechoslovak conditions, with the lowest earnings, the fewest social benefits, and the highest physical and time demands. Agricultural workers' dissatisfaction with the conditions and the authorities' refusal to transfer them to industry created long-standing conflicts. The mutual dissatisfaction resulted in a series of recurrent protests, absenteeism, and quasi-organized strikes, as well as a reluctance to extend employment contracts beyond their basic one-year period. Escapes proliferated and some workers returned home early. For example, Bulgarian workers who were not allowed to leave the workplace before their contracts had expired, often did so illegally. Cases of Bulgarians and Romanians fleeing to Germany appear in 1948.³⁰ Negotiations and complaints

²⁸Similar to the case of recruiting Italians to Belgium; see Adamec, "Hosté, kteří zůstali," 84.

²⁹NA, ÚPV-T, box 19, sign. 25/2, information on Romanian workers, including the text of the international agreement.

³⁰NA, ZUOP-P, box. 19, situation reports of the OÚOP OÚOP Plzeň and České Budějovice for June 1948; box. 20, situation reports of the OÚOP Plzeň for September 1948.

were sometimes stormy, and according to one report, some Romanian workers had to be arrested. In the summer of 1948, it seemed that most Romanians in Czechoslovakia were basically just waiting for their one-year contract to expire and looking forward to returning home. Dissatisfied with their earnings, Romanian workers did not plan to renew their contracts and pointed out that they could not even buy the necessary clothing for the following winter with the money they earned.³¹ Conflicts also accompanied the transport of Romanian workers to their homeland. For example, one group of workers in Moravia even forcibly occupied the railway station building in Svitavy while waiting for a special transport that was several days late, unwilling to wait in their current workplace and accommodation.³²

Compared to Romanians, Bulgarians were more interested in staying in Czechoslovakia. However, they were unwilling to sign new annual contracts, instead seeking complete freedom of movement and the opportunity to take advantage of the offer of casual work outside the controlled labor market, especially in the construction industry.³³ The aversion to agricultural work reached such a level that workers saw the almost equally unattractive labor in the brickworks as a reprieve. Some workers even preferred to apply for assignment to the coal mining brigades.³⁴ In 1948, the Czechoslovak authorities introduced screening of repeat Bulgarian applicants in an attempt to eliminate the return of problematic workers against whom complaints had been made by the authorities and employers.³⁵

Foreign workers were able to find their way around the gray zone of the labor market relatively quickly and take advantage of its offers. Despite a precise economic plan issued by the state, the viability of many enterprises or entire industries became dependent on improvisations that violated and circumvented the directives of the regulatory authorities. Escapes from employment gradually became a mass affair among foreign workers. In the OÚOP district in České Budějovice, for example, in August 1948, 60 out of 139 Bulgarians fled their assigned workplaces. In the Klatovy district, arriving Bulgarian workers assigned in September 1948 categorically refused to work in agriculture and immediately began to look for alternative jobs. At the time, the experience of workers from the first transports who had already completed one tour in Czechoslovakia and were now returning for a second tour, was already reflected in the behavior of the newcomers; they had naturally been informed by their more experienced compatriots. The authorities eventually had to accept this reality, and, in the interests of the final employers, began to tolerate arbitrary changes in work assignments. In the end, practice repeatedly showed that clearing the way for the laws of supply and demand often led to greater satisfaction. In Pilsen, for example, a group of agricultural workers who eventually found employment as pavers were able to find employment for their wives, who had accompanied them and welcomed the independent earnings. The situation in some districts is illustrated by a report from the Náchod district, according to which "Most Bulgarians achieved what they wanted: to get out of agriculture."³⁶

Italians were also successful in overcoming labor market barriers, fighting tirelessly to move to better-paid jobs. Their transfer to other industries was facilitated by an interstate agreement providing for the employment of Italians in industry. However, the resulting distribution of Italian workers did not correspond to the quotas, according to which 80 percent of the workers were to be employed in the mines and in agriculture. On the other hand, Italian workers were able to make do with other professions that were not very attractive. In Pilsen, the dissatisfaction of one group of workers was resolved by their employment in kaolin mining. Another group in the Havlíčkův Brod district extended their one-year contract after being transferred from quarry work to road construction.³⁷

³¹Ibidem.

³²NA, ÚPV-T, box 19, sign. 25/2, information on the incident with Romanian workers in Svitavy of 7 August 1948.

³³See e.g., NA, ZUOP-P, box 20, situation report of the OÚOP Plzeň for October 1948; box 21, situation report of the OÚOP Jindřichův Hradec for November 1948.

³⁴Ibid., box 19, situation report of the OÚOP Jičín for July 1948; box 20, NA, box 20, situation report of the OÚOP Mladá Boleslav for September 1948; box 21, situation report of the OÚOP Jičín for November 1948.

³⁵NA, MPrS, box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, dossier Bulhaří, personal secretary of the Ministry of the Interior Gríša Spurný for the Secretary of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labor on 20 April 1949.

³⁶NA, ZÚOP-P, box 19, situation report of the OÚOP Náchod for July 1948 and situation report of the OÚOP České Budějovice for August 1948; box 20, situation reports of the OÚOP Klatovy and Plzeň.

³⁷Ibid., box 18, situation report of the OÚOP Plzeň for January 1948; box 19, situation report of the OÚOP Havlíčkův Brod for August 1948.

The situation of the Romanians was equally complicated because of the language barrier. As a rule, constructive negotiations depended on the presence of an interpreter. But the sources also indicate that many younger people, especially young women, learned to speak serviceable Czech during their year-long stay. However, the language difficulties did not discourage Romanians from looking for other employment opportunities, as one of the official reports demonstrates: “It should also be noted that there are several cases where a Romanian worker has changed five employers in six months There are also many cases where these workers leave their jobs without the consent of the employer and the local authority and go to other districts, where they are given employment against all regulations.”³⁸

Foreign Workers in the Eyes of Officials and Employers

The reactions of employers varied. Their criticism was limited primarily to what they saw as the constant increase in employee demands and a poor work ethic. They also criticized the organization and distribution of the workforce. The summer of 1948, for example, was marked by complaints about the new recruitment of Bulgarians, with the threat that the labor force would not arrive until after the harvest, when most farmers were no longer interested. A similar situation was repeated in the autumn of 1948 with the Poles. The allocated quota of three hundred Polish workers could not be distributed by the OÚOP, for example, in Strakonice. Employers were also discouraged by the short six-month contract valid outside the main agricultural season and by previous bad experiences with Bulgarians and Romanians. Despite a critical labor shortage, only fifty-eight places were allocated, leading farmers to demand the return of displaced Slovak Hungarians and forcibly assigned Germans who had previously been deployed in agriculture. These farmers even threatened to leave the farms themselves otherwise.

The reluctance to employ foreign workers was clear in some regions. From the village of Dobré in the foothills of the Eagle Mountains, the local national committee reported that “despite the considerable need for labor, after last year’s experience there are no takers for Bulgarian workers. No one here even wants to hear about Bulgarians—let alone take them for work.”³⁹ On the other hand, we have ample evidence of employers in industry who were interested in foreigners and who also took the initiative to recruit them illegally. For example, the mining company Rudné a tuhové doly n. p. took thirty-five Bulgarians to the town of Příbram from the borderlands.⁴⁰ The managed labor market was thus crumbling under the eyes of the responsible authorities. An official from Trutnov described the flagrant situation in a number of districts where the officially non-existent free labor market thrived: “Foreigners, unless they are here on contracts (meaning mass interstate agreements), are a very permanent workforce. The fluctuation of these persons is insignificant.”⁴¹

OÚOP officials tended to generalize about the attitudes of certain groups of foreign workers. In doing so, they used existing group stereotypes, modified them, or created new ones. “All Romanians, without distinction, are very stubborn . . . so they must be dealt with vigorously.”⁴² While some reports express only generalities or use euphemisms, others present very blunt and direct condemnations. “The work ethic of Romanians,” one report stated, “has been very poor recently and their wage demands are exaggerated, demanding between 2,000 and 2,500 a month. When the peasants, forced by the shortage of agricultural workers, then accede to their demands, the Romanians increase them even more. The Romanians and Bulgarians are not at all comparable to the Germans in terms of their industriousness, and it is interesting to note that both Romanians and Bulgarians

³⁸Ibid., box 19, situation report of the OÚOP Kladno for June 1948; box 21, situation report of the OÚOP Jindřichův Hradec for November 1948.

³⁹Ibid., box 19, situation reports of the OÚOP České Budějovice and Náchod for June 1948; box 20, situation report of the OÚOP Strakonice for October 1948.

⁴⁰Ibid., box 18, situation report of the OÚOP Beroun for January 1948; see also in general Jiří Topinka, “Migrace pracovních sil v těžkém průmyslu 1945–1953 se zvláštním zřetelem na Kladno a Králův Dvůr,” in *Nucené migrace v českých zemích ve 20. století*, eds. Petr Bednařík, Helena Nosková, and Zdenko Maršálek (Prague, 2018), 255–62.

⁴¹Ibid., box 19, situation report of the OÚOP Trutnov for August 1948.

⁴²Ibid., box 18, situation report of the OÚOP Jičín for February 1948.

have volunteered for agricultural work, whereas the Germans are forced to do it.” Another report noted,

Despite very numerous but completely unjustified complaints, most Romanians want to stay here at least until Christmas and several will ask for a one-year extension to their contracts. Would that be possible if some injustice is being done to them here? They are simply taking advantage of the situation, of the shortage of labor at harvest time, and in quite a draconian way are forcing higher salaries and various other favors.

Repeated comparisons between the work ethic of forced German workers and volunteer workers from friendly countries undermined the ideologically obligatory postwar anti-Germanism.⁴³ In contrast, there are also several nuanced assessments in the reports, including outright positive feedback. In one report from Trutnov, for example, the Romanians were described as excellent, high performing forest workers. In Jičín, the Bulgarians earned a good rating for low “fluctuation” (*fluktuant* was a pejorative term for someone who changed jobs frequently), and the Romanians were described as the best agricultural workers ever, as in the February report from Mladá Boleslav.⁴⁴

Naturally, not all workers from the same country displayed identical work habits. For example, Italians coming from the south, according to one report, “are by their nature unsuited to our environment, they are not tenacious in their work, they are afraid to work in the mines underground,” and if they are in groups with Italians from the north, they “hate each other and fight fiercely.” Otherwise, the Italians’ work ethic was rated very highly. Officials repeatedly raised doubts both about the selection and screening of workers in the home countries with regard to skills and their familiarity with the conditions of employment in Czechoslovakia.⁴⁵

In addition to low wages, poor working and social conditions also affected the mood of the workers. In the fall of 1947, a pressing problem arose with winter clothing. In fact, German military shirts had to be distributed to the Romanians in 1947.⁴⁶ Complaints about the quality of accommodation were also widespread. In the case of Italy, the unsatisfactory experiences of the workers in Czechoslovakia in 1947 had a very negative impact on the recruitment and even led to its suspension and a revision of the Italian rules for future recruitment contracts. Complaints included harsh working conditions, completely inadequate accommodation for workers, and even the starvation to which they were subjected.⁴⁷ On the other side, employers and officials also commented about poor housekeeping and hygiene levels, especially among Romanian workers.⁴⁸ Reports on workers’ nutrition are similarly contradictory. We have information about strikes by Romanians over low food rations. At the same time, however, we learn that some transports arrived with workers physically unfit for hard labor and in a generally deplorable state of health. In 1947, cases of typhoid fever and tuberculosis appeared among the incoming Romanian workers.

The sources indicate some improvements. One Czechoslovak report from 1948, in connection with the return of the Romanians to their homeland, states, “In general we can say that now . . . we have found, in comparison with the condition in which they arrived from Romania (photographs of the assembly camp are at hand), that they have all greatly improved their physical condition, are well-nourished, and everyone now has several working and at least one nice walking suit.”⁴⁹ Under the

⁴³Ibid., situation report of the OÚOP Benešov for January 1948, box 19, situation report of the OÚOP Strakonice for August 1948 and of the OÚOP Náchod for July 1948.

⁴⁴Ibid., box 20, situation reports of the OÚOP Trutnov, Benešov and Beroun for October 1948; box 19, situation report of the OÚOP Jičín for June 1948; box 18, situation reports of the OÚOP Mladá Boleslav for February 1948.

⁴⁵NA, MPPrS, box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, dossier Itálie, Information for the minister on 4 December 1948.

⁴⁶NA, f. MPSP, box 424, inv. 863, sign. 2359, correspondence between the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare and the Ministry of Domestic Trade from November 1947.

⁴⁷Colucci, *Forza lavoro*, 215–17.

⁴⁸See *ibid.*, box 20, situation report of the OÚOP Plzeň for September 1948.

⁴⁹NA, f. MPSP, box 417, i. č. 861, sign. 2350, Ministry of Health for the Ministry of Social Welfare on 22 July 1947 regarding the transport of Romanian workers in the detention center in Svitavy; NA, ZUOP-p, box 18, situation report of the OÚOP Plzeň for January 1948; box 19, situation report of OÚOP Kladno for March 1948.

provisions of the Romanian agreement, workers could export purchased personal items to Romania in bulk transports, which many of them used to export various industrial and consumer goods. For example, there is a recorded case of the export of two motorcycles, 50 kg of nails, and 50 kg of lard by one person.⁵⁰ Italians enjoyed relatively better pay conditions than other guest workers and remittance strategies differed among the different groups of workers. A comparison from 1948 shows that about 10,000 Bulgarian workers sent home less than two million CSK, while about 8,500 Romanians sent home 8.5 million CSK for a comparable period of employment. The most striking comparison is the 1,228 Italians who transferred more than 16.5 million CSK.⁵¹

Political and Ideological Context of Employment of Foreigners

The situation of workers was also influenced by a number of foreign and domestic political factors, including dynamic developments in their home countries. In Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland, workers and their families became objects in the policymaking of consolidating communist regimes. In late 1947 and early 1948, communists seized power in Romania. After the abdication of King Michael, some workers in Czechoslovakia allegedly no longer felt bound by the interstate agreement and left their jobs. At the same time, a small number of other Romanians returned to Czechoslovakia, changed their original decision to return, and asked for extensions to their contracts. In particular, men born in 1927 and liable for military service sought to extend their job contracts.⁵²

Ideology also played an important role in the employment of foreign workers. The Czechoslovak government emphasized friendship and international cooperation with other “people’s democratic” states. The continuing nationalization of the economy, accompanied by the elimination of private enterprise, also invited ideological interpretation. In explaining some of the difficulties of foreign labor in 1948, communists therefore criticized the irresponsible attitude of private peasant employers and bureaucratic incompetence prior to the February 1948 coup.⁵³ The presence of workers from Italy thereafter acquired a special ideological significance. Following the coup, the Italian community in Czechoslovakia became the object of a propagandistic political struggle in Italy between the communists and the ruling Christian Democrats. On the heels of emigration organized by the Italian Communist Party (CPI) between Italy and Czechoslovakia, some former partisans and communist militants wanted by the police also found refuge in Czechoslovakia. The CPI tried to train cadres in Czechoslovakia, who were then tasked with indoctrinating the entire Italian emigrant community.⁵⁴ The internal political struggle was thus transferred from Italian to Czechoslovak territory, where communist agitators clashed with Italian consular workers and even an Italian priest who worked among the laborers. The arrival of a group of seventy Italian miners originally employed in Austria who requested relocation to Czechoslovakia shows how such labor tensions could be mobilized for propaganda purposes. However, after a relatively short period of time, these workers began to leave their new jobs because of unsatisfactory wages. In 1949, plans were revived at the state level to employ more Italian unemployed workers in cooperation with the Italian trade union headquarters. This was to be a visible expression of workers’ solidarity and an attempt to compete with the aid provided to Italians by the USA and other Western countries.⁵⁵ In 1951, the Italian government withdrew from the emigration agreement in Czechoslovakia, yet individual emigration apparently continued for several more years.⁵⁶

⁵⁰NA, MPrS, box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, correspondence from 1950 regarding the transport of Romanian workers to their homeland.

⁵¹NA, MPrS, box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, dossier Italové, information for the Minister from 13 December 1948, fol. 453.

⁵²NA, ZÚOP-P, box 18, situation report of the OÚOP Kladno for February 1948; box 20, situation report of OÚOP Havlíčkův Brod for October 1948; box 21, situation report of the OÚOP Strakonice for November 1948.

⁵³NA, ÚPV-T, box 19, sign. 25/2, report of the Revolutionary Trade Union for Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocký from 16 July 1948.

⁵⁴Colucci, *Forza lavoro*, 212, 218–22.

⁵⁵NA, MPSP, box 417, inv. 861, sign. 2350, correspondence on negotiations with Italy from 1946–1948; NA, MPrS, box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, dossier Italové.

⁵⁶Colucci, *Forza lavoro*, 221–22.

The employment of Polish workers in the industrial area of Ostrava developed in a very specific political context from 1945 onward. Their work can be divided into two phases. The first phase took place in a period of persistent tension between the two neighboring states. At this time, the employment of Polish workers was not regulated in any way and, in the context of the Czech-Polish conflict in the Těšín region, represented a manifestation of the local ethnic problems. The presence of a large number of Polish commuters became a sensitive issue in the region.⁵⁷ Despite the existing tensions, however, local cross-border traffic continued more or less uninterrupted, and the employment of Polish citizens followed the laws of supply and demand. According to available data, the rate of such employment increased steadily.⁵⁸ The easing of tensions between Czechoslovakia and Poland ordered by Stalin and the conclusion of the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance in the spring of 1947 allowed the employment of Poles in Czechoslovakia to become the subject of interstate agreements and cooperation.⁵⁹ According to various data, the number of workers with Polish citizenship in the region oscillated between 2,900 and 8,000 in 1947–48, a figure also assumed for the first five-year period. The wide range of the numbers quoted relates to the liberal and probably also semi-legal practices of the employers themselves.⁶⁰

Negotiations on Polish employment contracts, which began at the end of July 1949, were initiated by requests of Czechoslovak employers in the Ostrava region who felt an acute shortage of labor in the first year of the five-year plan. Negotiations eventually culminated on 4 October 1949 with the signing of an agreement between the regional labor offices in Katowice in Silesia and Ostrava in Moravia.⁶¹ The further employment of Polish workers in Ostrava is somewhat unclear and it is questionable whether the agreement ever came into real effect.⁶² In Poland, a six-year economic plan was launched in 1950, which, as in Czechoslovakia, was oriented primarily toward the massive development of heavy industry. The decisive moment for the employment of Polish workers in the Ostrava region was the currency reform, which was kept secret until the last moment and implemented on 31 October 1950. The readjustment of the exchange rate of the Polish *złoty* against the Czechoslovak *koruna* completely devalued the benefits that working in Czechoslovakia brought to Polish workers. This meant a further loss of the remaining Polish commuters, and Polish citizens ceased to play a significant role in Ostrava's labor force.⁶³

The deployment of Polish agricultural workers also illustrates some limitations in employment of foreigners among the Eastern Bloc countries. Negotiations on the "aid of Polish workers to Czechoslovak agriculture" began in June 1948 and thus took place under political conditions different from those of the previous recruitments in Bulgaria, Romania, or Italy.⁶⁴ The expected departure of other groups of workers from agriculture required rapid replacements, and the acceleration of Polish recruitment seemed highly desirable.⁶⁵ During the negotiations in Warsaw, however, the

⁵⁷Tomáš Dvořák, "Between Fraternal Help and Economic Realism. The Employment of Polish Workers in Czechoslovakia 1945–1950," *Historia Slavorum Occidentis* 10 (2020): 101–31.

⁵⁸NA, fond Klement Gottwald 1938–1953 (KG), vol. 45, item 854, sheet 125, report on conditions in the borderlands compiled on the basis of the findings of delegations of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia deputies, 1–3 September 1947.

⁵⁹On the Polish workers in the Ostrava region, see Dvořák, "Between Fraternal Help"; Dušan Janák, "Dopad polské měnové reformy v roce 1950 na Ostravsku," in *Měnové systémy na území českých zemí 1892–1993. Sborník z konference v Opavě 22. a 23. března 1994* (Opava 1995), 99–104; Jiří Friedl, "Otázka zaměstnávání dělníků z Polska na Těšínsku v letech 1945–1947," *Slezský sborník* 108 (2010): 79–91.

⁶⁰By October 1947, the authorities supposedly issued even more than 13,000 work permits to Polish workers. Cf. Friedl, "Otázka zaměstnávání dělníků," 90; Janák, "Dopad polské měnové reformy," 100; NA, MPrS, box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, material sent on 27 March to the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Rudolf Slánský, fols. 486–488.

⁶¹NA, MPSP, box 441, inv. 957, sign. 5269, the text of the agreement concluded between the Regional National Committee in Ostrava and the Employment Office in Katowice.

⁶²NA, MPrS, box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, sheet 518, extracted from the minutes of the meeting between Ministers Erban and Rusínko on 28–29 December 1949.

⁶³Janák, "Dopad polské měnové reformy," 100.

⁶⁴NA, MPrS, box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, report to Minister Erban dated 29 August 1948.

⁶⁵NA, fond Ministerstvo zemědělství-sekretariát, inv. 156, box 372, Secretariat of the Ministry of Agriculture to the Office of the Presidium of the Government on 19 August 1948.

initially very accommodating Polish side made unexpected new demands. The Czechoslovak negotiators demanded political approval from their superiors of the proposed terms. A particularly illustrative document is a note from an official of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Robert Obrusník, to Minister of Social Welfare Evžen Erban, in which he writes of the negotiations in Warsaw: "It will be necessary to consider all the economic and political aspects and then decide responsibly whether it is worthwhile for us to accept this white elephant. It will be a difficult decision even for the Prime Minister."⁶⁶

The agreement was finally approved in haste on 21 August 1948. Obrusník's assessment of Prime Minister Zápotočský's reaction proved correct. The record of Zápotočský's remarks in the cabinet meeting reveals the economic and social reality of the Czechoslovak labor market on the threshold of the deep crisis of consolidating communist rule. He said,

... it is common knowledge that we have great difficulties and inconveniences with the implementation of similar agreements. It is clear that the content of this agreement must give rise to illusions among the Polish agricultural workers that we will never be able to fulfill. According to the agreement, they can expect to be able to buy clothes and other textile goods from us; it says that they will have the same entitlements as our workers, but we do not know whether we will be able to give anything to our own workers. It is not impossible that for the entire expected six months, our workers will not receive any textile goods either. On the part of the Polish trade unions, however, the contract is ideal. If they themselves wanted to give their workers what we have to give them here, they would have to go bankrupt.

At the same time, Zápotočský had anticipated that the agreed upon quota of 10,000 workers would not be met, and this also proved to be the case.⁶⁷

Wages were the biggest problem. The Poles demanded a 30 percent premium for their workforce over the Czechoslovak tariffs. The Czechoslovak party knew well that the level of remuneration in domestic agriculture was totally inadequate, but selective favoring of foreign workers would be a sensitive matter with the public.⁶⁸ The Czechoslovak party tried to compensate for the Poles' low wages by providing the opportunity to procure textile goods or by giving workers the opportunity to upgrade their skills. The fulfillment of these offers, however, continued to exceed the material and organizational abilities of the state.

The recruitment of Poles into agriculture also involved another political and ideological distortion that contradicted the economic logic of labor immigration. According to the original agreement, Polish workers were to be allocated only to state farms, not to individual peasant farms.⁶⁹ The entire arrangement was thus conceived as part of the incipient discrimination against private farmers. The government records show that Poles could also be assigned "to individual farmers who have a positive attitude toward our building efforts."⁷⁰ Indeed, there were cases, as in the above-mentioned district of Strakonice, where, in view of the "anticipated development of agricultural policy," the need for labor for medium-sized peasants and the "kulaks" was ignored.⁷¹ However, the overall reality was different in the end. In the Benešov district, private farmers employed some of the Polish workers in violation of the directives.⁷² The total number of deployed Polish agricultural workers was then estimated at 3,700 in the spring of 1949. Of these, only 2,200 were employed on state farms. Although their

⁶⁶NA, MPrS, box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, sheet 528–529, Robert Obrusník to Minister Erban from Warsaw on 18 August 1948.

⁶⁷NA, KG, item 1494, vol. 143, minutes of the cabinet meeting of 7 September 1948, 21–24.

⁶⁸NA, MPSP, box 417, inv. 861, sign. 2350, correspondence between the Office of the Presidium of the Government, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare and the Central Council of Trade Unions from May to September 1947.

⁶⁹NA, ZUOP-P, box 20, situation report of the OÚOP Mladá Boleslav for October 1948; NA, MPrS, box 49, inv. 93, sign. 119, fol. 834–837, report to the minister from 11 May 1949.

⁷⁰NA, ZUOP-P, box 20, situation report of the OÚOP Mladá Boleslav for October 1948; NA, MPrS, box 49, inv. 93, sign. 119, fol. 834–837, report for the minister of 11 May 1949.

⁷¹NA, MPSP, box 379, correspondence between OÚOP Strakonice and Ministry of Social Welfare from November 1948 – February 1949.

⁷²NA, ZUOP-P, box 21, Situation reports of the OÚOP Mladá Boleslav, OÚOP Plzeň and OÚOP Benešov for December 1948.

demand increased in the spring, Poles typically responded to attempts to transfer them from the private sector by returning to their homeland.⁷³

In 1949, top Czechoslovak party and economic bodies concluded that further employment of foreigners was not desirable for the Czechoslovak labor market. This came despite the continuing and deepening labor shortage. Recruitment of foreigners was henceforth to be limited to exceptional cases justified by special qualification requirements or the needs of preferred branches of industry. This doctrine was also incorporated into the preparation of the five-year economic plan.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, among the authorities responsible for labor policy, efforts to use foreign resources persisted for some time. In 1949, for example, a proposal emerged in the management of the Czechoslovak state farm enterprises to recruit agricultural workers from Hungary.⁷⁵ By the 1950s, however, the arrival of foreign workers was already taking other forms. In 1950, Bulgaria asked Czechoslovakia to place 869 workers and 594 apprentices so that they could gain qualifications in professional occupations across the spectrum of industrial production. However, the Bulgarians themselves eventually lost interest in this cooperation in 1951.⁷⁶ A similar model was also considered by the Czechoslovak authorities in late 1949 as a contribution to the development of “People’s Democratic” China. However, in addition to the proposal to place 530 apprentices, a survey of possible interest in Chinese workers was also carried out in individual enterprises. The result was a demand for 12,500 persons for industry and 1,000 families for state-owned farms.⁷⁷ The recruitment did not take place, and a large number of foreign workers did not arrive until later decades.⁷⁸

Conclusion

One of the tools for solving the Czechoslovak labor shortage following World War II was the hiring of foreign workers. In addition to recruiting workers from the friendly countries of the emerging Eastern Bloc, Czechoslovakia, along with France, Belgium, and Great Britain, became one of the first countries to conclude bilateral immigration agreements with Italy, the largest source of free labor in Europe in 1946 and 1947. Of the other Eastern European countries, only Hungary took the same step in 1952.⁷⁹

Although recruitment initially met the high expectations, it was ultimately of marginal importance in terms of the size and structure of the Czechoslovak labor market. Analysis of the political negotiations and the recruitment process shows that it was hardly realistic for Czechoslovakia to procure sufficient labor abroad. The local authorities instead had to free up labor reserves by restructuring internal resources as part of the so-called national mobilization of the workforce.⁸⁰

The presence of foreign workers in postwar Czechoslovakia had distinct features. These were mostly short-term stays concentrated in a few postwar years and did not become a prelude or a base for immigration, as in Germany or other Western European countries.⁸¹ This raises the question of whether the Czechoslovak case can be compared with the current or later phenomenon of employing foreign workers in Western Europe. For example, such a situation took place in Germany only in the late 1950s and 1960s. Such a comparison would be complicated and dubious in terms of the long-term effects on the

⁷³NA, MPrS, box 49, inv. 93, sign. 119, fol. 834–837, report for the minister of 5 May 1949.

⁷⁴NA, ÚV KSČ-HR, vol. 3, item 48, report to protocol of the Economy Council of 6 January 1949, fol. 19; NA, fond Generální sekretariát KSČ, vol. 146, item 953, fols. 154–155, report of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare on the situation among the workforce dated 9 July 1949.

⁷⁵NA, MPrS, box 49, inv. 93, sign. 119, fols. 834–837, report for the minister of 5 May 1949.

⁷⁶Ibid., box 58, inv. 164, sign. 181, information on Bulgarian apprentices dated 24 August 1950 and report of 5 May 1951.

⁷⁷Ibid., box 47, inv. 75, sign. 103, dossier Čiňaně, information for Deputy Minister of Labor Kijonka dated 14 December 1949.

⁷⁸These were mainly workers from Poland, Yugoslavia, Cuba, or Vietnam; cf. the above-mentioned thematic collection entitled *Gastarbeitři v Československu 1945–1989*.

⁷⁹According to available information, however, the Italian-Hungarian treaty did not enter into real life. Grazia Prontera, “Das Emigrationszentrum in Verona Anwerbung und Vermittlung italienischer Arbeitskräfte in die Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1955–1975,” in *Das “Gastarbeiter“-System. Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte Band 104*, eds. Jochen Oltmer, Axel Kreienbrink, and Carlos Sanz Diaz (Munich, 2012), 90.

⁸⁰Dvořák, “Migration and Managing.”

⁸¹Geddes, *Analysing the Politics of Migration*, 14.

economy and society. But even if the presence of foreign workers in Czechoslovakia represents a mere episode and a demographically marginal phenomenon, we can at least compare the political goals, the concepts of labor market regulation, and, to some extent, the patterns of social behavior of foreigners or employers themselves.

Through a comparative perspective, we can also verify the main causes of the relative failure of Czechoslovak recruitment programs. We can easily identify the lack of flexibility and organizational deficiencies of the planned economy and the decline in the attractiveness of the Czechoslovak labor market. Political and ideological obstacles overriding economic interests also contributed to the failure, including the decline in the supply of labor from friendly countries. Yet, the basic calculation of Czechoslovak authorities did not differ much from the thinking in Germany. In both countries, *Gastarbeiter* were supposed to fill gaps in unattractive professions quickly, flexibly, and temporarily.⁸² Assumptions about the distribution and deployment of foreign workers and the ability of specific employers to absorb and meet the expectations of this workforce proved incorrect already at the outset of recruitment. For the first phase of employment of foreign workers in Germany from 1955 until the recession of 1966–67, or the cessation of recruitment in 1973, the literature more or less agrees on the direct benefits of labor migration for German economic growth. Czechoslovak contemporary documents, on the other hand, point to the inefficiency of recruitment from the start.

In Germany, one of the significant positive effects was the operation of the “buffer mechanism.” This was the ability of recruitment to interact with the laws of supply and demand, whereby incoming labor was able to smooth out fluctuations between boom and recession and to balance demand in the German labor market, even between economic sectors or regions. The dynamics of arrivals and returns of foreigners have also been largely in line with this.⁸³ The Czechoslovak authorities had similar goals. However, their fulfillment within a centrally planned and controlled economy proved illusory. The planned economy also assumed a planned distribution of labor, which did not take into account the laws of supply and demand and relied on preliminary estimates and calculations and on the precise organization and discipline of the workforce. But none of these assumptions worked. In addition to its organizational shortcomings, Czechoslovak labor policy from 1945 onward was also characterized by a tendency to use various forms of coercion, both against groups deprived of citizen rights (Germans and Hungarians) and against its own citizens, who were increasingly subjected to various restrictions.⁸⁴

The hired workers themselves also proved unwilling to respect regulations and to ignore the laws of supply and demand. Informal mechanisms and incentives eventually prevailed in social negotiations between foreign workers and employers. The foreigners were then able to navigate the gray area of the Czechoslovak labor market and find better working and living conditions. The flexibility of Western European labor varied greatly from country to country. In Germany, for example, Italians had the highest fluctuation rates, which was also due to the introduction of free movement within the European Economic Community in the early 1960s.⁸⁵ The fluctuation of Turkish workers was, on the other hand, limited by a system of restrictions and sanctions which, paradoxically, seem to have been not only stricter but also more enforceable than in communist Czechoslovakia.⁸⁶ The increasing tendency toward emergency management of labor policy was also reflected in the inability to optimize the skills structure of the incoming workforce. J.D. Steinert points to the German practice in the 1950s and 1960s of optimizing the structure of the workforce by maintaining or increasing the

⁸² Adamec, “Hosté, kteří zůstali,” 85–6.

⁸³ Jürgen Fijalkowski, “Gastarbeiter als industrielle Reservearmee? Zur Bedeutung der Arbeiterimmigration für die wirtschaftliche und gesellschaftliche Entwicklung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 24 (1984): 424–26; Cem Özdemir, *Currywurst und Döner: Integration in Deutschland* (Bergisch Gladbach, 1999), 71; Klaus J. Bade, *Vom Auswanderungsland zum Einwanderungsland? Deutschland 1880–1980* (Berlin, 1983), 67–81; Ulrich Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik in Deutschland: Saisonarbeiter, Zwangsarbeiter, Gastarbeiter, Flüchtlinge* (Munich, 2001), 206–16.

⁸⁴ Dvořák, “Migration and Managing.”

⁸⁵ Roberto Sala, “Die migrationspolitische Bedeutung der italienischen Arbeitswanderung in die Bundesrepublik,” in *Das “Gastarbeiter“-System. Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte Band 104*, eds. Jochen Oltmer, Axel Kreienbrink, and Carlos Sanz Diaz (Munich, 2012), 82–87.

⁸⁶ Karin Hunn, “Nächstes Jahr kehren wir zurück ...”: die Geschichte der türkischen “Gastarbeiter” in der Bundesrepublik (Göttingen, 2005), 109–10.

proportion of skilled labor while ensuring the inflow of the necessary lower-skilled workers.⁸⁷ Czechoslovakia, despite the same initial postulates, soon concentrated essentially only on the inflow of unskilled labor.

The labor market in Czechoslovakia became a comparatively unattractive space. The development of the German economy showed the potential to attract foreign workers over the long-term and *en masse*. Under the conditions of the Czechoslovak planned economy, such potential simply did not arise. The small proportion of foreign workers who remained or intended to stay in Czechoslovakia shows that there still existed some permanent migration pull factor, especially for groups of citizens of less developed Eastern European countries. However, Czechoslovakia did not even meet the expectations of either the Bulgarian or Romanian workers and admitted that it was hardly able to fulfill the promises contained in the bilateral agreements. Its refusal to participate in the Marshall Plan and its deepening political dependence on the USSR also limited its appeal to foreign workers.

The employment of foreign workers in Czechoslovakia was not only based on economic assumptions, but on political and ideological factors. Similarly, in Germany, recruitment policy was not dictated solely based on the needs of the labor market. Bilateral agreements concluded with the Mediterranean countries from the late 1950s onward were largely the result of their own initiative and also reflected the foreign policy and foreign trade interests of the time.⁸⁸ Some common features of Czechoslovak and German practice can also be found in the perception of foreigners by employers and host companies. Prejudices and stereotypes about different groups were not expressed by Czechoslovak officials alone. Their statements were entirely in keeping with the mindset captured in the reports of German recruiters in the 1960s. They enumerate, not only in the case of Turks, the “typical” characteristics of workers of different origins, who were seen as suitable or unsuitable for certain work activities.⁸⁹

In sum, we can say that many of the differences between the Czechoslovak experience from 1945 to 1950 and the German experience from 1955 to 1967 (or 1973) lie primarily in the extent and scope of their labor program and not in its fundamental vision. Indeed, the concepts, motivations, and mindset in which they developed exhibit a number of remarkable commonalities. As for the further potential of the topic of *Gastarbeit* in Czechoslovakia, the quantitative disproportion of this phenomenon compared to the Western European experience prevents us from placing the Czechoslovak case directly in the broader context of foreign recruitment programs or immigration as such. Nevertheless, the numerous structural parallels and political implications offer worthy suggestions for further research.

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⁸⁷Johannes-Dieter Steinert, “Migration and Migration Policy: West Germany and the Recruitment of Foreign Labour, 1945–61,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, no. 1 (2014): 9–27, here 12.

⁸⁸Steinert, “Migration and Migration Policy,” 12–19, 26.

⁸⁹Hunn, “Nächstes Jahr kehren wir zurück,” 102–5.