

# Czechoslovakia, Eastern Bloc and Expert Missions to Africa. An Introduction to the Special Issue<sup>1</sup>



Mikuláš Pešta

## ABSTRACT

As this introductory study argues, state socialist experts dispatched for Africa during the Cold War were an important current in global transfers of knowledge. The paper introduces the scholarship on socialist experts and their relations to international organizations, modernization theory and the concept of development. Furthermore, it also delves into the personal experience of the experts in the place of their positioning and how they affected and were affected by the environment they were sent to. The paper thus summarizes the state of art and explores the possibilities of where the research might go from here.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1977, the group of Czechoslovak expert teachers returned from Cairo, where they served at the Military Technical College. During the eighteen years of the military assistance to the construction of the school, hundreds of Czechoslovak experts took part in the teaching programs and oversaw graduation of thousands of students. The goodbye, however, was rather awkward. As it was ex post assessed by the commander of the expert mission, the decision to terminate the Czechoslovak engagement was a political one. Egypt was gradually amending its relations to the United States and cutting its ties to the Eastern Bloc. The Czechoslovaks tried to hold their position for a couple of years, but eventually, they had to go. Still, as the commander proudly stated, many goals of the mission were fulfilled. According to him, Czechoslovaks managed to build a modern scientific facility. “We can boldly say that the MTC is that kind of school that is indispensable for any big developing country, any country with truly revolutionary, anti-imperialist, national-liberation program (...)” Many students that were taught by Czechoslovak experts had already assumed teachers’ positions and would continue, to some extent, passing on the knowledge they had learnt,

---

<sup>1</sup> The research was funded by the program “PRIMUS (21/HUM/011): African and Middle Eastern Elites Educated in former Socialist Countries: Studies, Trajectories, and Mind-sets” and by the “Cooperatio Program, research area History”.



as well as the positive image of Czechoslovakia.<sup>2</sup> The knowledge the experts left behind kept producing fruit; and just the same, the imprint of the environment — students, Egyptian colleagues, local people — was brought home to Czechoslovakia.

This case is not unique. Over the four decades of the Cold War, thousands of specialists set out for a journey to Africa from Czechoslovakia alone; and many more came from the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. Their missions varied in different times, different locations and in terms of their developmental and political goals, so it is not an easy task to make general assumptions or conclusions. We can say, however, that the ‘export of experts’ from socialist countries represented a significant current in the globalizing world — a current of knowledge that has been half-forgotten, consciously or otherwise. It is good to see that in recent years, fascinating stories of state socialist experts in Africa, Asia and Latin America have been rediscovered and reintroduced in the academic environment in publications and at conferences. One such event where the matter was thoroughly discussed was a conference titled *Viva Africa* which took place at Charles University in Prague in September 2021. This special issue is based on two panels from the otherwise wide range of topics of this Africanist conference — panels that focused on state socialist experts in Africa during the Cold War. We thank the organizers — in particular Vojtěch Šarše and Markéta Křížová — for making the event happen and for cooperation on preparation of this special issue. Based on the panels, we have gathered four case studies on Czechoslovak experts in Africa and one more general paper on Soviet teachers.

## EXPERT KNOWLEDGE

The papers in this issue concern with the matter of knowledge production and transfers of knowledge between the socialist countries and Africa during the Cold War. They are selected cases of what can be considered as expert knowledge and what role it could play in the development of newly decolonized African states as well as in personal development of the people involved. At the core of these knowledge transfers lied the education. The two most important ways how to forward an academic expertise was through incoming students and outgoing experts. From organizational point of view, these two channels were often thought of as only two iterations of one thing; the socialist experts teaching African students, either in Czechoslovakia or in Africa, depending on what was more efficient. Nevertheless, the social aspect of course differed greatly.<sup>3</sup>

2 Jaromír Machač, *Zpráva vedoucího čs. odborníků na MTC o výsledcích akce MTC a poznatcích i zkušenostech z její realizace*. 20 July 1977. Vojenský historický archiv — Vojenský správní archiv, fond MTC, ka 418.

3 The of topic of African and Third World students in the socialist countries has got a lot of attention by researchers recently. See for example C. KATSAKIORIS, *The Lumumba University in Moscow. Higher Education for a Soviet-Third World Alliance, 1960-91*, in: *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2019, pp. 281-300; J. HESSLER, *Third World Students at Soviet Universities in the Brezhnev Period*, in: L. TOURNÈS — G. SCOTT-SMITH (eds.), *Glob-*



Transfers of expert knowledge could be viewed as a subcategory of information exchange between the East and the South. The socialist countries were also focusing on media aimed at the Global South countries, such as the radio broadcast, journals, and books, all of which consisted of *knowledge* (information) and were designed to pass on a message to African readers and listeners. In various contacts between the socialist and the ‘developing’ countries, all sorts of *knowledge* were exchanged — during political visits and economic negotiations, during sports events, tourist trips and youth festivals, information and experience was passed on.<sup>4</sup>

The expert knowledge that we examine here, however, needs to be specified — what makes it *expert*? The authors of an introduction to the special issue concerning with transnational circulation of state socialist experts have set three criteria how to define bearers of expert knowledge: “First, they belong to state institutions and professional bodies which the party-state designed to be responsible for the administration and policy-making in a certain field/subject. Second, they employ specialized languages that are standardized via scientific publications at home and abroad. Third, they participate at a national and international dialogue, which was promoted by different tools of intellectual exchange (journals, volumes, conferences), with their peers from other countries.”<sup>5</sup> For a definition of an expert in general, we might only alter the first condition and omit the necessity of belonging to a state institution.

In this issue, however, we employ a broader definition of a state socialist expert. It is a person sent out on a mission by a state institution but does not necessarily have to engage in academic debate or pursue an academic career. The expert knowledge can be also technical or practical — what makes it *expert* is the fact that the bearers of such knowledge were sent out *because* they had it and *in order to* transfer it or use it.

---

*al Exchange. Scholarships and Transnational Circulations in the Modern World*, Berghahn, 2018, pp. 202–215; M. E. HOLEČKOVÁ, *Příběh zapomenuté univerzity. Universita 17. listopadu (1961–1974) a její místo v československém vzdělávacím systému a společnosti*, Praha 2019; S. PUGACH, *African Students and the Politics of Race and Gender in the German Democratic Republic, 1957–1990*, in: Q. SLOBODIAN (ed.), *Comrades of Color. East Germany in the Cold War World*, Oxford 2015, pp. 131–156; M. C. SCHENCK — F. RAPOSO, *Socialist Encounters at the School of Friendship*, in: E. BURTON — A. DIETRICH — I. R. HARISCH — M. C. SCHENCK (eds.), *Navigating Socialist Encounters. Moorings and (Dis)Entanglements between Africa and East Germany during the Cold War*, Berlin 2021, pp. 235–246; T. RUPPRECHT, *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin. Interaction and Exchanges between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War*, Cambridge 2015, pp. 191–229.

- 4 For knowledge transfers / circulation during the Cold War, see for example C. DERICHS, *Knowledge Production, Area Studies and Global Cooperation*, New York 2017; A. APPADURAI, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*, in: *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1990, p. 295–310; A. LEANDER — O. WAEVER (eds.), *Assembling Exclusive Expertise. Knowledge, Ignorance and Conflict Resolution in the Global South*, New York 2019; A. LITTOZ-MONNET (ed.), *The Politics of Expertise in International Organizations. How International Bureaucracies Produce and Mobilize Knowledge*, London 2017
- 5 B. C. IACOB — C. DOBOS — R. GROSESCU — V. IACOB — V. PASCA, *State Socialist Experts in Transnational Perspective. East European Circulation of Knowledge during the Cold War (1950s–1980s): Introduction to the Thematic Issue*, in: *East Central Europe*, Vol. 45, No., 2018, pp. 145–159, here 147.



In this sense, we can talk about technicians, military instructors, engineers, agriculture specialists, teachers without academic careers, economists — and still call them experts. Even though we focus on those experts who transferred their knowledge, there were also those who were only meant to deliver a report or a project, so they only passed on the knowledge indirectly.

The use of socialist experts was diverse. In general, the histories of the expert knowledge are interlinked with the history of science, development, student mobility and overall with knowledge production. Many were working for the state or Eastern European international structures, such as COMECON, or were networked with global organizations with scientific, cultural, economic, or political agendas.<sup>6</sup> As recent scholarship has shown, these organizations could serve as platforms where people from both East and West met and cooperated, aspiring to surpass or moderate the Cold War conflict. While the politics always played an important part, these organizations certainly facilitated global transfers of knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

The role of expertise in state socialist systems has also been recently discussed by historians. In a way, the technocratic form of government and administration can be viewed as the preferred concept among the post-Stalinist state socialist policy makers. In Czechoslovakia, the scientific-technical revolution was thoroughly discussed — and, as the authors of the book about Czechoslovak technocratic government argue, it was an intrinsic part of the 1960s reform process. The new stage of the construction of socialism was supposed to introduce more reason in the administration — the scientific and *expert* politics were supposed to make the government more effective and modern.<sup>8</sup> And even though the Warsaw Pact intervention brought a swift end to the ‘Prague Spring’, many ideas of the technocratic government of experts survived and were further developed during the subsequent ‘normalization’ regime. The term and concept of ‘scientific technical revolution’, promoted in Czechoslovak environment especially by the team around Radovan Richta, survived the purges in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) and ‘consolidation’ of the new power structures.<sup>9</sup> Drawing from this recent research, Barbora Buzássyová connects the themes of Czechoslovak reform thought with the evolution of the concept of development in her study in this special issue. Similar elements of ‘scientification’ of state administration can be observed also in other countries of the Eastern Bloc and even in capitalist countries, albeit in varying forms.

---

6 For socialist experts in international organizations, see for example L. PORTER, *Cold War Internationalisms. The USSR in UNESCO*, PhD Diss., Chapel Hill 2018; B. BUZÁSSYOVÁ, *Socialist Internationalism in Practice. Shifting Patterns of the Czechoslovak Educational Aid Programmes to Sub-Saharan Africa, 1961–1989*, PhD Diss., Bratislava 2021; See also contributions to the special issue of *East Central Europe*, Vol. 45, No., 2018.

7 M. CHRISTIAN — S. KOTT — O. MATĚJKA, *International Organizations in the Cold War. The Circulation of Experts beyond the East-West Divide*, in: *Acta Universitatis Carolinae: Studia Territorialia*, Vol. No. 1, 2017, pp. 35–60.

8 V. SOMMER — M. SPURNÝ — J. MRŇKA, *Řídit socialismus jako firmu. Technokratické vládnutí v Československu, 1956–1989*, Praha 2019, pp. 5–13.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 57–64. For Richta’s concept, see R. RICHTA et al., *Civilizace na rozcestí. Společenské a lidské souvislosti vědecko-technické revoluce*, Praha 1966.

## DEVELOPMENT AND THE GLOBAL COLD WAR

In the light of this recent academic research, it is also possible to reframe the expert missions to the Global South. In post-socialist memory, the entanglements between Central Eastern Europe and the Global South “came to be considered, at best, curiosities, or, at worst, evidence of nefarious dictatorships which had torn Eastern European populations from their true home in European civilization”.<sup>10</sup> Even in more balanced academic takes on the global Cold War, student and expert mobilities were interpreted as a part of the geo-strategical policy intended to win over the ‘hearts and minds’ of peoples of the decolonized world, and thus also get the upper hand over the capitalists in the never-ending struggle for dominance. The political aspect was very important — there is no doubt about that. But studies of experts transcend many perspectives in the research field of the East-South relations and there are several other possible interpretations of them. The most frequent framing — aside from the political one — is the look at the expert missions as the currents in global transfers of knowledge that shape modernization and globalization. A vague and undeterminable concept as it is, the modernization theory can still offer an explanation to what was the nature and mission of expert mobility. We may use the framing of the modernization theory, although challenged and criticized, to try to comprehend what these missions were meant to accomplish. The goal, in this view, is for the ‘underdeveloped’ countries to imitate the process that went on in Europe since the Enlightenment, generally known as ‘modernization’. Under this term, we usually understand a set of qualitative processes comprising industrialization, development of infrastructure, literalization and education for all, establishment of a civic society and of a political life, establishment of a sovereign nation-state, development of rational and verifiable scientific methods, and also progresses in other fields of society. The problem inherently present in such a framing, as well as one of the main points of critique of the theory, lies in the fact that the theory works with explicit or at least implicit superiority of processes that have been taking place in Europe. Modernization as a universal recipe for the development of humankind was a cornerstone of justifications of the imperialist conquest; if it was Europe who first walked the pathway that everybody else has to take, why should she not teach the rest how?

This line of thinking omits the formative influence on global development by non-Western actors.<sup>11</sup> It also sets the dichotomy of mutual relations rather on the North-South axis than on the Cold War East-West-South triangle. From this perspective, it was not that important whether it was a socialist or a capitalist country that was sending the experts. “From Indonesia to Iraq, fraternal socialist aid bore much in common with aid from capitalist countries: an emphasis on industrialization and large showcase projects, a determination to integrate the Third World into global trade networks, and the application of technical expertise,” as David Engerman put

<sup>10</sup> J. MARK — P. BETTS, *Introduction*, in: J. MARK — P. BETTS (eds.), *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation*, Oxford 2022, pp. 1–24, here 1.

<sup>11</sup> S. LORENZINI, *Global Development. A Cold War History*, Princeton 2019; E. BURTON — J. MARK — S. MARUNG, *Development*, in: J. MARK — P. BETTS (eds.), *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation*, Oxford 2022, pp. 75–114.



it.<sup>12</sup> We can argue whether there is only one, universal modernity, or whether we can speak of different forms of modernities. Soviet ideas of progress may have not been drastically different from what was understood under the general term of *modernization*. As per Artemy Kalinovsky: “Soviet Union claimed to be building a new world substantially different from the one that came before, untethered to tradition and technologically advanced—in broad outlines, at least, a definition of modernity that was widely recognized for the bulk of the twentieth century.”<sup>13</sup> In both East and West, there was a clear hierarchical relation in knowledge transfers; a relation between the one who teaches and the one who is taught. And similarly, even the knowledge itself is hierarchical — the European knowledge production is seen as superior. Even the Marxist theory resulted from European philosophical traditions and its promotion as universal at the expense of the local radical and revolutionary thought could have been seen as European supremacism.<sup>14</sup>

The state socialist regimes naturally tried to frame the transfers of knowledge in a different way. It was not exporting modernization as a universal concept, but instead a socialist model of development — one that is inherently modern, more dialectically advanced than the capitalist one. In the line of Khrushchev’s peaceful coexistence, the socialist model of development was supposed demonstrate the superiority of the Soviet economic system over the capitalist one.<sup>15</sup> This idea of an alternative modernization even gave way to an idea of *alternative globalization*, a set of economic, political and cultural links between the socialist and the Global South countries that seemed, at the time, as a viable alternative to the liberal capitalist globalization.<sup>16</sup> One field of socialist expertise that has been studied recently, is the architecture and urban planning. As introduced by Jakob Marcks in his review essay in this issue, we can see the growing scholarship and practical examples of export of architectural models from Eastern Europe to the Global South.<sup>17</sup> The impact of socialist experts on the development of the Global South is often focused on engineering, agriculture, industry and other ‘technical’ fields, but it is important not to forget the humanities, as well. As an example, we can mention Czechoslovak Egyptologists who helped save the

12 D. C. ENGERMAN, *The Second World’s Third World*, in: *Kritika*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2011, pp. 183–211.

13 A. KALINOVSKY, *Laboratory of Socialist Development. Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan*, Ithaca 2018, p. 6.

14 For the concept of Marxism as a part of European thought, see D. CHAKRABARTY, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton 2000, p. 3–23.

15 A. IANDOLO, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Model of Development in West Africa, 1957–1964*, in: *Cold War History*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2012, pp. 683–704.

16 For elaboration of this concept, see J. BOCKMAN, *Socialist Globalization against Capitalist Neocolonialism. The Economic Ideas behind the New International Economic Order*, in: *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2015, pp. 109–128; A. CALORI et al., *Alternative Globalization? Spaces and Economic Interactions between the ‘Socialist Camp’ and the ‘Global South’*, in: A. CALORI et al. (eds.), *Between East and South: Spaces of Interaction in the Globalizing Economy of the Cold War*, Berlin 2019, pp. 1–31; J. MARK — A. M. KALINOVSKY — S. MARUNG (eds.), *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*, Bloomington 2020.

17 L. STANEK, *Architecture in Global Socialism. Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War*, Princeton 2020.

archaeological sites in Lower Nubia about to be flooded by the new Aswan Dam.<sup>18</sup> But the knowledge was also transferred in the fields of history, philosophy, or linguistics.<sup>19</sup>



## EXPERT MISSIONS AND STATE SOCIALISM

The image of development that is both socialist *and* modern, however, played an important part in the East-South relations. In the cultural diplomacy towards Africa, Czechoslovakia intensively promoted an image of itself as a country with effective political and economic system, with modern and functional healthcare and education, and with rich culture and history at the same time.<sup>20</sup> The expertise that was sold to African countries — literally or figuratively — was labelled the same: modern, progressive, and at the same time socialist, anti-capitalist. Elizabeth Bishop, the author of a thesis concerning with perhaps the biggest developmental project realized with the help of socialist experts in the Third World — the Aswan High Dam in Egypt — wrote that “just like their contemporaries, Michurinist biologists, Soviet hydroelectric engineers framed their work as distinctively progressive and anti-capitalist. Soviet engineers contrasted their intellectual and practical work with that of capitalist engineers, whose work in Egypt betrayed their colonialist aims.”<sup>21</sup> One of Czechoslovak experts that had returned from the Military Technical College in Cairo, said in his assessing paper: “The main success of our activity in Egypt was that to thousands of students, we presented a new man — socialistically thinking man, and socialistically acting man. A man without personal interests, who seeks to provide all the information he can for the good of the country that hosts him. How different this was to the local teachers I had the opportunity to meet. For them, teaching itself came last.”<sup>22</sup> As shown by Constantin Katsakioris in this issue, the socialist language and tropes were a crucial part of the imported knowledge.

The development, as we can see, was very much a political business. As verbalized by Engerman, the development aid “ultimately functioned not as just as a new tool of

18 M. VERNER, *Objevování starého Egypta. Půlstoletí českých egyptologických výzkumů ve stínu pyramid*, Praha 2008, p. 25–93.

19 For a case of a Czechoslovak philosopher in Ghana in the context of Czechoslovak development programs, see J. KOURA, *Socialist experts in Nkrumah’s Ghana*, in J. KORANYI — J. KOURA — B. STRUCK, *Modern Europe. A Transnational History*, forthcoming; See also the philosopher’s memoirs: E. MENERT, *Na Západ od Londýna*, Praha 1967.

20 See for example Czechoslovak propagational journals distributed in Africa, such as *Solidarity* or *Czechoslovak Life*.

21 E. BISHOP, *Talking Shop. Egyptian Engineers and Soviet Specialist at Aswan High Dam*, PhD diss., University of Chicago 1997, p. 5.

22 Mojmir Cenek, *Vědecká příprava arabských asistentů, vědecko-výzkumná spolupráci s ostatními školami, ústavy a závody. Protokol o metodickém zaměstnání k vyhodnocení akce MTC*, 30. 4. 1978, VSA, f. VAAZ, ka 418. See also M. PEŠTA, *Expert Knowledge and Socialist Virtues. Czechoslovak Military Specialists in the Global South*, in: K. ROTH-EY (ed.), *Second-Third World Spaces in the Cold War: Global Socialism and the Gritty Politics of the Particular*, London, forthcoming.



foreign policy; it helped shape new patterns of relations between nations.”<sup>23</sup> Building on his research, Małgorzata Mazurek wrote that the development politics, meaning “the novel mix of international relations, expertise, and financial assistance that emerged during the global Cold War, did not only concern the effective deployment of technical expertise,” suggesting that it had great diplomatic significance.<sup>24</sup> When trying to define what the socialist expertise was, the authors of the above mentioned introduction to the special issue stated: “We conceive expertise and politics to be irreducible because they are engaged in a mutually reinforcing dynamic of co-producing knowledge and policy”<sup>25</sup>

For Czechoslovakia, expert missions were indeed a very important part of the foreign policy towards Africa. A 1971 definition of a Czechoslovak expert said that “an expert is not only a highly qualified specialist, but also a political representative of socialist Czechoslovakia abroad. (...) It is important that the expert is able to explain Czechoslovak socialist reality in foreign language and confront it correctly with other, non-socialist systems.”<sup>26</sup> The process of choosing, as described by Jakub Mazanec in this issue, took into account the professional expertise, the language skills, and political reliability — even the criteria were not always met.<sup>27</sup> The chief of the expert mission at the MTC in Cairo repeatedly emphasized that experts represent Czechoslovakia and socialism and must behave accordingly. “An indivisible part of our mission is our attitude to problem-solving, personal example in work and seriousness in dealing with partners. We have to make socialism attractive to our partners and remain down to earth about the pace of its implementation. Our words must match our deeds, in work and behaviour we must show deliberation, principles, tact, industriousness, organization, planning, consistency, decisiveness, and a resolute and active stance toward socialism. Do not underestimate the partners and do not let it seem like you do. We do not only have expert tasks here.”<sup>28</sup> When assessing the experts in hindsight, the last chief of the mission in Cairo stated that the “ideal expert was physically active, middle aged, professional, politically conscious, flexible, psychologically balanced, language skilled.”<sup>29</sup> Not only the expertise, and

23 D. C. ENGERMAN, *Development Politics and the Cold War*, in: *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2017, pp.

24 M. MAZUREK, *Polish Economists in Nehru’s India. Making Science for the Third World in an Era of De-Stalinization and Decolonization*, in: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 77, No. 3, 2018, pp. 588–610.

25 IACOB (et al.), *State Socialist Experts in Transnational Perspective*, p. 148.

26 Quoted in HOLEČKOVÁ, *Příběh zapomenuté university*, p. 65.

27 See also B. BUZÁSSYOVÁ, *Building and Testing Trust Within a Socialist Dictatorship: The Case of Czecho-Slovak Experts in Africa Pre- and Post-1968*, in: *Forum Historiae*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2021, pp. 69–85. For the case of East German medical experts, see I. BOROWY, *Medicine, Economics and Foreign Policy. East German Medical Academics in the Global South during the 1950s and 1960s*, in: P. E. MUEHLENBECK — N. TELEPNEVA (eds.), *Warsaw Pact Intervention in the Third World. Aid and Influence in the Cold War*, London 2018, pp. 173–196.

28 Josef Vosáhl, ‘Zkušenosti z práce vedoucího čs. odborníků na MTC’, 12. 4. 1973, VSA, f. VAAZ, ka 419.

29 Jaromír Machač, *Zpráva vedoucího čs. odborníků na MTC o výsledcích akce MTC a poznacích i zkušenostech z její realizace* ‘Protokol o metodickém zaměstnání k vyhodnocení akce MTC’, 30. 4. 1978, VSA, f. VAAZ, ka 418.





even not only the political profile, as we can see, were considered important to make the right impression on the partner institution.

The importance of experts' perfect representation might be put in a broader context of international economic relations. In this explanation, it was the economics that set the course of developmentalism as well as the *alternative globalization*. As it is argued, the cultural diplomacy, developmental aid, and experts' exemplary behaviour were meant not only to promote socialism, but also to bring home the much-desired hard currency. In the case of Czechoslovakia, it was the foreign trade corporations subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Trade that arranged and negotiated the expert missions. These semi-autonomous corporations were licensed with monopolies to import or export certain sorts of goods. The experts were often handled by the foreign trade corporation of Polytechna, a powerful organization with its own network of agents supervising the labour of its workers abroad. Another such organization was Omnipol and Hlavní technická správa (Main Technical Administration), tasked with handling export of arms and military technology. These corporations had to fall in line with official diplomatic directives of the Czechoslovak state, but sought more independence and flexibility at the same time. After the first wave of enthusiastic internationalism of the early 1960s faded, the Ministry of Foreign Trade aspired to make the export more profitable and demanded more autonomy on other ministries. In the view of the Foreign Trade, the goal of export was an economic one, which meant selling to the highest bidder, even if it was a capitalist country.<sup>30</sup> However, even though we can see a clear shift toward more economy-oriented line in the late 1960s and on, the politics always had a say in the trade, especially in strategic materials and goods. Barbora Buzássyová assessed that this turn to a more pragmatic, profit-oriented line and fallback from internationalism in expert missions came gradually over the 1960s.<sup>31</sup>

Dealing with transfers of knowledge, we have to also think about the actors. Besides the experts themselves, there were several institutions involved on the sending side — not just the states themselves. Even though in state socialist countries, the state and party administrations grew through each other and influenced immensely all political and socio-economic life, individual institutions within them could have had their own agendas or preferences. The universities were closely controlled by the state and party apparatus, but they also had their international networks and were involved in trans-bloc scientific exchange.<sup>32</sup> In Czech environment, we have seen accounts that framed the Czech Technical University or the Czechoslovak Academy of

30 D. RICHTEROVA — M. PEŠTA — N. TELEPNEVA, *Banking on Military Assistance. Czechoslovakia's Struggle for Influence and Profit in the Third World, 1955–1968*, in: *International History Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2021, pp. 90–108.

31 B. BUZÁSSYOVÁ, *Od internacionalistickej pomoci k pragmatickej spolupráci. Priority československého „expertního poradenstva“ v oblasti vedy a vzdelávania pre krajiny Afriky v priebehu 60. a 70. rokov*, in: *Historický časopis*, Vol. 69, No. 1, 2021, pp. 119–146.

32 CHRISTIAN — KOTT — MATĚJKA, *International Organizations in the Cold War.*; M. SOLOVEY — H. CRAVENS (eds.), *Cold War Social Science: Knowledge Production, Liberal Democracy, and Human Nature*, New York 2012; MIKKONEN — P. KOIVUNEN, *Introduction*, in: S. MIKKONEN — P. KOIVUNEN (eds.), *Beyond the Divide. Entangled Histories of Cold*



Science as actors in the transnational 'export' of experts.<sup>33</sup> In some cases, the institutions could even have conflicting agendas, as we have seen on the example of the Ministry of Foreign Trade. But there were other actors at play, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and other institutions and individual actors. In case of military experts, it was the Ministry of National Defence that secured the missions and came into conflicts with the Foreign Trade as to what the purpose of the 'export of experts' should be.<sup>34</sup> The growing emphasis on trade and profit led several actors in the Global South as well as researchers think about the differences and similarities of the Western and Eastern development assistance.<sup>35</sup> In his essay in this issue, Matyáš Borovský also addresses the competition among the socialist countries, as their interests often did not align.

### EVERYDAY LIFE OF CZECHOSLOVAK EXPERTS IN AFRICA

The experience which experts gained varied greatly, depending on the country, the nature and extent of the mission, and on the experts themselves. David Mosse introduced the international expert communities as closed, 'mobile and separated from contextual attachments.'<sup>36</sup> The state socialist experts were also living and working in a semi-closed space, although the circumstances of the isolation were different. The missions could have been small, from only a couple of people or even one person, to large teaching corpora of hundreds of instructors and their families. These communities could be seen as expatriate spaces, as the experts brought pieces of Czechoslovakia with them — not only possessions, but also way of life, daily routines, values, or prejudice.<sup>37</sup> The everyday life Czechoslovak experts in Africa is also one of the connecting themes of this special issue; in their case studies, Matyáš Borovský, Jakub Mazanec and Barbora Menclová all concern with the environment the experts found themselves in.

---

*War Europe*, 2015, pp. 1–19; More generally for permeability of the Iron Curtain see J. SURI, *Conflict and Co-operation in the Cold War: New Directions in Contemporary Historical Research*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2011, pp. 5–9.

33 A. MACKOVÁ-JŮNOVÁ, *Export of Experts. Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and Iraq in the 1960s*, in: *Práce z dějin Akademie věd*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2018, pp. 47–76; K. MÁDROVÁ, *Development and Strategy of the Czech Technical University's Contacts with Third World Countries in the 1960s*, in: *Práce z dějin Akademie věd*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2018, pp. 21–44.

34 RICHTEROVA — PEŠTA — TELEPNEVA, *Banking on Military Assistance*.

35 Z. GINELLI, *Hungarian experts in Nkrumah's Ghana*, in: *Mezosfera*, May 2018, <http://mezosfera.org/hungarian-experts-in-nkrumahs-ghana/>; J. KOURA, — R. WATERS, 'They are as Businesslike on that side of the Iron Curtain as they are on this'. *Czechoslovakia and British Guiana*, in: N. TELEPNEVA — P. MUEHLENBECK (eds.), *Warsaw Pact Intervention in the Third World. Aid and Influence in the Cold War*, London 2018, pp. 74–94.

36 D. MOSSE, Introduction. *The Anthropology of Expertise and Professionals in International Development*, in:

37 See a classic study on expat communities: E. COHEN, "Expatriate Communities," *Current Sociology* Vol. 24, No. 3, 1977, pp. 5–90.



Even though the community was semi-closed, the experts did not live in a vacuum in their host countries. At their workplace, whether it was an educational institution or a construction site, they interacted with their students and local colleagues, or with experts from other countries. This was naturally the very purpose of the missions and the intended means of knowledge transfers. But at the same time, the knowledge and experience were exchanged with neighbours, shopkeepers, bus and taxi drivers, people in bars and restaurants. There were many records of inappropriate behaviour on the side of the experts who came from an ethnically very homogeneous country with cultural and racial stereotypes and a long tradition of orientalist production; for many of them it was the first time they encountered non-white persons. Different manners were sometimes a source of awkward situations — for example when the expert families were advised to hire servants, as it would look unfit to their status to clean their households themselves. But at the same time, not being used to it, they were not comfortable with a house service.<sup>38</sup>

The relations in expert communities were diverse, as there were often also wives (an overwhelming majority of travelling experts were male) and children. When Czechoslovak experts' missions lasted longer than six months, they were usually allowed to bring their families with them. Not only the experts themselves, but also their families had to obey strict sets of rules and represent their socialist motherland.

Strict demands on representation were only one of many difficulties the expats had to withstand. They had to put up with isolation — the contact with the locals was often scarce and interactions were limited to the community itself. In such circumstances, the relations could have been difficult — events such as love affairs could have damaged the community badly. The Czechoslovaks had to live and work in very different environment, with often harsh climatic conditions, strange cuisine, and diseases they were not accustomed to. The experts even had to endure wars and coup d'états, such as for example the Six-Day War, the toppling of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana in 1966 or that of Ben Bella in Algeria. The civil war in Angola is another example of such uneasy environment, as covered by Barbora Menclová in this issue. Angola was also the scene of perhaps the most extreme hardship the Czechoslovaks experienced — in 1983, a group of experts was kidnapped by one of the fighting sides. The pressure was also put on them by the secret service, which often saw the communities as an easy way to secure new contacts among the locals, as the students working with Czechoslovak teachers were often members of the elite with perspective to assume positions in the state administration or business. As shown in Matyáš Borovský's study, the difficult situation could have been even more complicated by criminal behaviour, both by and on Czechoslovak citizens.

## CONCLUSION

The expert missions could have had various dimensions and served various purposes. They were a source of hard currency and an opportunity to exert political influence for state institutions. For the experts themselves, the experience could have varied

---

<sup>38</sup> E. BURTON, X.



from an exotic adventure to a difficult professional or personal challenge, or as shown by Jakub Mazanec, also a way to emigration.

The authors of the introduction to the special issue that was cited earlier stated: “We argue that state socialist experts, rather than being oddities of postwar European and global dynamics within international organizations, were significant actors, who did much more in transnational milieus than advance ideological agendas.”<sup>39</sup> We can subscribe to that statement and apply to state socialist expert missions in Africa. There, we can also see diverse perspectives; diverse goals that they served, diverse significance for both sending and recipient countries and their economies, diverse functions in globalization currents, diverse effects on the experts’ lives. The topic still remains under-researched many of these perspectives unexplored.

We would be glad if this special issue could contribute to that exploration and add to the discussion about the role of socialist experts in the post-war world.

---

<sup>39</sup> IACOB (et al.), *State Socialist Experts in Transnational Perspective*, p. 154.