

“Introducing the Presence of Socialist Czechoslovakia into the Consciousness of Libyan Society:” Socialist Experts and Their Role in Prague-Tripoli Relations, 1969–1989.

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ABSTRACT

Gaddafi’s revolution fundamentally changed the approach of socialist states to Libya and opened new possibilities for cooperation between the Eastern bloc and the newly formed Libyan Arab Republic. As Czechoslovakia did not want to be left behind, it started trying to break into the Libyan market in the early 1970s, especially using Czech experts in the fields of healthcare, geology, and engineering. Beginning in 1974, Czechoslovakia started seeking to consolidate its position in the Libyan economy and to aid the country’s modernization by sending out experts under a scientific and technical cooperation program. However, it faced a number of obstacles. One such obstacle was the competition between the Warsaw Pact states in Libya. Prague sent hundreds of civilian experts to Gaddafi’s Libya between 1970 and 1989, contributing substantially to the reputation of socialist Czechoslovakia not only in Libya but throughout the Third World. Based on never-before-used materials from Czech archives, this study attempts to portray the workings of the scientific and technical cooperation between Czechoslovakia and Libya and its importance to Czechoslovakia-Libya relations. The text discusses, among other things, the question of Czechoslovakia’s self-representation as an autonomous business actor, and the problematic aspects of the life of Czechoslovak experts in Libya.

KEY WORDS

Libya, Czechoslovakia, civilian experts, Gaddafi, scientific and technical cooperation

INTRODUCTION

Communist Czechoslovakia first became active in Africa in the early 1950s, especially in the economic and military spheres. Among the North African countries that gradually became the center of Czechoslovak interest were Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt.¹ The Maghreb region became the focus of Czechoslovakia’s efforts to showcase

1 See P. ZÍDEK — K. SIEBER, *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948–1989*, Praha 2009; J. KOURA, *A Prominent Spy: Mehdi Ben Barka, Czechoslovak Intelligence, and Eastern Bloc Espionage in the Third World during the Cold War*, in: *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2021, pp. 318–339. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2020.1844363>.



its goods and expertise, especially in the fields of medicine, geological exploration, construction, and hydrology. Libya, however, as virtually the only country in North Africa, remained on the periphery of Czechoslovak interest for a long time. That is because from gaining its independence in 1951 onward, it was a capitalist monarchy tied to Western powers, especially the United States and Great Britain.² However, a fundamental change occurred in 1969 in this respect when Muammar Gaddafi took power in Libya. Czechoslovakia, like the other Eastern Bloc countries, rushed to recognize the new Gaddafi regime with the vision of changing Libya's orientation and tilting it eastwards, which would present new economic and political opportunities for Prague. From the 1970s onward, Czechoslovakia actively pursued these opportunities, as reflected, among other things, through a program of scientific and technical cooperation (*vědecko-technická spolupráce*, VTS) with Libya, which is the focus of this study. Within the framework of the VTS program, hundreds of Czechoslovak experts from the ranks of healthcare, geological, construction and technical specialists from various fields were sent to Libya. At the same time, dozens of Libyan students were admitted to Czechoslovak universities.

The principal aim of this text is to contribute to the study of the role of socialist experts sent from Czechoslovakia to Libya, and their influence on the formation of the foreign policy of Czechoslovakia towards the regime of Muammar Gaddafi.³ The foreign policy role of socialist experts sent to the countries of the Third World is seen as an important factor of mutual cooperation, especially since Czechoslovak experts, whether they did so consciously or unconsciously, were proponents of the socialist state system and contributed significantly to the reputation of Eastern Bloc countries, in this case Czechoslovakia.⁴ The experts' influence can be seen as crucial in terms of Czechoslovakia's efforts to break into Libyan state institutions and the Libyan market, which were then to aid Prague in influencing political and economic developments in the country. In line with recent findings in the field of socialist expertise on the Cold War, this text works with two hypotheses. First, Czechoslovakia enjoyed considerable autonomy in sending civilian experts to Libya and did not have to answer to or coordinate its steps with the Soviet Union. Czechoslovaks could freely conclude the relevant civil contracts. The second hypothesis is that socialist states competed with one another in an effort to occupy advantageous positions in Libya's economic hinterland. Libya became a popular location not only for Czechoslovaks but also for Polish, Bulgarian and Romanian experts. The work of these experts was not centrally coordinated, which led to direct competition in terms of the price and quality of work.⁵

2 Both the US and the UK had military bases in Libya. See K. SIEBER, *Cesta ke spojení. Komunistické Československo a Kaddáfího Libya 1969–1979*, in: *Historický obzor*, No. 9–10, 2000, p. 226.

3 This text draws on the definition of socialist experts given in a study conducted by B. C. Iacob. See B. C. IACOB et al., *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. 2–3, Brill 2018.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Among others, Przemysław Gasztold-Seń points to the competition between Eastern Bloc countries in Libya in his recently published article. See P. GASZTOLD-SEŃ, *Arms, Advisors*



However, in the context of the presented theses, other questions arise that have not yet been answered. A key question to be examined in this study is whether Czechoslovakia was trying to present itself in Libya as part of the socialist camp through its experts, or whether it was primarily trying to improve its own political and economic position in Libya and within the countries of the Third World in general. As noted, Czechoslovaks faced competition not only from the capitalist West, but also from the other Eastern Bloc countries. It is therefore important to ask if and how this competition between formally 'brotherly' states affected their activities in Libya. Since Czechoslovak experts found themselves working in Libya in a completely different climate, but above all in different social and cultural conditions, the text will also assess the struggles facing Czechoslovaks living in Libya as an illustration of the overall shape and form of the scientific and technical cooperation program.

No comprehensive analysis of the issues dealt with in this study has been conducted as of yet in Czech or foreign historiography. Although the topic of socialist experts and their work in Third World countries has recently come to the fore in Cold War studies, the cooperation between Czechoslovakia and Libya in the expert field has yet to receive a more detailed look. However, the study of the influence of socialist experts on the course of the Cold War and their role in shaping relations between the Eastern Bloc and Third World countries is important and opens up new areas of understanding. Firstly, it allows us to focus on the transfer of knowledge between socialist states and their partners in the Third World. It also highlights the fact that despite the ideological diversity of these partners (such as Libya), Eastern Bloc countries were committed to breaking into local markets and presenting the achievements of socialist economy and science.⁶

Relations between Prague and Tripoli have so far been treated only in general diplomatic or military terms, mainly in the context of Czechoslovak arms exports to Libya.⁷ This study therefore delves into a new and completely unexplored topic that

and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Polish-Libyan Military Cooperation, 1970–1990, in: *The International History Review*, Vol. 44, No. 4, DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2021.1991978.

- 6 Nowadays, more and more literature is being published on the topic of socialist experts. See, e.g.: I. BOROWY, *Medicine, Economics and Foreign Policy: East German Medical Academics in the Global South during the 1950s and 1960s*, in: P. H. MUEHLENBECK, N. TELEPNEVA (eds.), *Warsaw Pact Intervention in the Third World*, London 2018, pp. 173–196; C. KATSAKIORIS, *Creating a Socialist Intelligentsia. Soviet Educational Aid and its Impact on Africa (1960–1991)*, in: *Cahiers d'études africaines*, Vol. 2, No. 226, 2017, pp. 259–288., D. C.; ENGERMAN, *Learning from the East: Soviet Experts and India in the Era of Competitive Coexistence*, in: *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2013, pp. 227–238; Y. HONG, *Cold War Germany, the Third World, and the Global Humanitarian Regime*, New York 2015; A. M. KALINOVSKY, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan*, Ithaca 2018.
- 7 ZÍDEK — SIEBER, *Československo a Blízký východ*; K. SIEBER, *Cesta ke spojenectví*, pp. 226–233., E. GOMBÁR, *Libya and Czechoslovakia 1960–1992*, in: *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi e Documentazione Dell'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, Vol. 63, No. 2, 2008, pp. 359–364, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25734512>; M. BOROVSÝ, *Podání ruky "vzteklemu psu Blízkého východu." vztahy mezi Kaddáfího Libyí a Východním blokem na příkladu ČSSR*. Master's Thesis, Prague 2020.



has considerable potential for the future. This study is predominantly based on materials from Czech archives, primarily the National Archives of the Czech Republic (NA CR) and the never-before-treated Gustáv Husák collection. The author also consulted documents from the Security Services Archive (SSA) and the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMFA).

SPEED IS KEY

On 1 September 1969, a military coup took place in Tripoli and Benghazi, Libya's two largest cities, which dethroned King Idris and established the Libyan Arab Republic (LAR). A young officer, Muammar Gaddafi, took the helm of the new regime and began the transformation of Libya, which mainly consisted of eliminating Western influence on the workings of the state.⁸ Czechoslovakia was initially reticent to recognize Gaddafi's government, mainly due to uncertainty about the ideological direction of the Libyan regime. However, the then ambassador of Czechoslovakia to Libya, Ján Teluch, soon assured the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa*, KSČ) that "even if the new regime is not outright pro-socialist, it will not be anti-socialist."⁹ Although this was not entirely accurate, as Gaddafi had clearly defined himself against the Soviet Union and communism in general at the beginning of his rule, 1970 saw Czechoslovakia embarking on the journey of breaking into the Libyan market with its goods. However, the possibilities didn't stop at exporting goods — there was now also opportunity for Czechoslovak participation in the modernization of Libya.

Shortly after its establishment, the LAR was lacking know-how, manpower and skilled professionals. The professional staff shortage was noted and reported to Prague by František Čulík, the Czechoslovak representative on the new Libyan Technical Planning Committee sent there by the United Nations. Čulík pointed in particular to vacancies for experts in the field of urban planning and stated that Libya deserved "special attention and an exceptional approach in developing mutual relations in the long term."¹⁰ Although Czechoslovakia was not completely new to Libya, having been involved in the construction of the road between Nalut and Ghadames near the Libyan-Algerian border which had started in 1968, the country had not yet had the opportunity to effectively break into Libyan institutions and planning authorities.¹¹

8 On the history of Libya. See E. GOMBÁR, *Dějiny Libye*, Praha 2015.

9 SIEBER, *Cesta ke spojenectví*, p. 227.

10 Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMFA), Teritoriální odbory — tajné (TO-T) 1970–1974, Informace o rozvoji styků s LAR, 30 December 1970, Libya — Box 3, File 262/211.

11 The construction of the Nalut-Ghadames road was tendered by the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in 1968 under financial conditions unfavorable for Prague. Its implementation was fraught with many problems and dragged on until 1972. Security Services Archive (SSA), Hlavní správa rozvědky Sboru národní bezpečnosti (HS-SNB), Zpráva k situaci na stavbě zahraniční investiční akce v Libyi: výstavba silnice Nalut Ghademes a Tourist Beach Country (turistické plážové středisko), 20 March 1971, Reg. No. 80743 I. S.



The opportunity for Czechoslovak state-owned enterprises to gain greater involvement in the development of the Libyan economy arose in the spring of 1971. In March, an international trade fair was held in Tripoli, at which several Czechoslovak foreign trade corporations (*Podniky zahraničního obchodu*, PZO), such as Strojexport, Pragoexport, Motokov and Centrotex, presented themselves. The stated aim of the enterprises' presence at the fair was to demonstrate Czechoslovakia's intention of getting more intensively involved in economic cooperation with Libya.¹² However, building Czechoslovakia's reputation in Libya took longer than the Communist Party leaders would have liked. Hopes of improving the position of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (ČSSR) on the Libyan market were pinned mainly on the aforementioned Nalut-Ghadames road construction project. A large number of Czechoslovaks were involved in the construction work — the vast majority of the estimated 500 Czechoslovak citizens present in Libya in 1972. Workers and construction experts were mainly sent by the state-owned enterprises Dopravní stavy Olomouc (DSO) and Armabeton Praha, while geological surveys for the road and other construction work were carried out by Prague enterprise Geindustrie.¹³

Despite the fact that, according to available information, the prestige of Czechoslovak enterprises in Libya kept growing, Prague did not manage to reach the desired position in the Libyan state apparatus. Czechoslovaks faulted Libyans for being passive and remiss when it came to establishing closer cooperation, which, at least according to the Czechoslovak point of view, was exacerbated by ideological and confessional differences between the two nations. Gaddafi was reportedly concerned about the spread of communism in Libya, and, on top of that, distrusted Czechoslovak representatives because of their atheism.¹⁴

From the Czechoslovak perspective, the situation improved slightly after 1973 due to international developments. Muammar Gaddafi, who had relied on Egyptian experts and manpower until then, had a falling out with Egypt's leader Anwar Sadat as a result of the Yom Kippur War.¹⁵ Gaddafi, in an attempt to fill the gap left by the departure of Egyptian experts, contacted the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries. What was crucial in terms of establishing cooperation between Libya and Czechoslovakia was the official visit of Libya's second-in-command, Abdesalam Jalloud, to Prague in February 1974. The Czechoslovak-Libyan negotiations

12 SSA, HS-SNB, Zpráva o výsledcích kontrarozvědné obrany čs. účasti na mezinárodním veletrhu v Tripoli, April 1971, Reg. No. 80743 I. S.

13 AMFA, TO-T 1970–1974, Situace v čs. kolonii v LAR, 24 October 1972, Libya — Box 3, File 262/211.

14 AMFA, TO-T 1970–1974, Zpráva pro kolegium — ZÚ Libya, 31 May 1973, Libya — Box 3, File 262/112.

15 Gaddafi viewed Sadat's attack on Israel, which he had not consulted with Libya, as an act of betrayal and a hostile gesture. The final split between the two countries came in 1978 as a result of the Camp David negotiations and the Egypt-Israel peace treaty. AMFA, TO-T 1970–1974, Situace v LAR po vypuknutí konfliktu na BSV, 18 October 1973, Libya — Box 3, File 262/111. For more information on Libyan foreign policy, see S. STOTTLEMYRE, *Tactical Flexibility: Libyan Foreign Policy Under Qadhafi, 1969–2004*, in: *Digest of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2012, pp. 178–201.



resulted, among other things, in an agreement on scientific and technical cooperation.¹⁶

SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL COOPERATION

Immediately after the signing of the VTS agreement, the first Czechoslovak medical team and about thirty other technical experts traveled to Tripoli.¹⁷ The aim of Czechoslovaks' involvement in Libya was to create a favorable environment for possible further activities of the ČSSR, especially in the field of constructing investment units without competitive tendering. By signing the VTS agreement, Prague also sought to deepen Czechoslovak-Libyan diplomatic relations, which was to lead (and ultimately did lead) to an official visit to Tripoli by Czechoslovak Prime Minister Lubomír Štrougal.

After the signing of the VTS agreement, Czechoslovak experts were sent to Libya mainly through two state-owned PZOs, namely Polytechna and Strojexport. The experts sent through the former were mainly doctors and medical personnel, but they were not high in numbers.¹⁸ This was mainly due to the fact that these experts were not compensated well in Libya. When it came to the latter, the situation was much better. In December 1975, a total of 110 experts were working in Libya through Strojexport, primarily in well drilling and road construction.

Prague soon discovered that it was more efficient both in terms of pay and political impact to send whole teams of experts to Libya instead of individuals. However, from the Czechoslovak point of view, larger expert groups also required stricter ideological control, which was mainly reflected in the 'mass-political' work with the drilling section.¹⁹ Thus, politically aware members of the KSČ were placed in the leading positions in the individual groups in order to stop more and more workers and experts emigrating to the West.²⁰ Curiously, Libya seemed inclined to take on whole teams of experts, mainly due to the bureaucratic facilitation of the whole process. Although the will to cooperate was mutual, in some cases it clashed with administrative rigidity and reluctance. Czechoslovaks believed Libya was at fault, as according to them, the country did not respond to Prague's offers with sufficient flexibility. However, they also displayed a certain degree of self-criticism, particularly with regard to getting the experts ready to be sent off and providing a clear definition of their rights

16 P. ZÍDEK — K. SIEBER, *Československo a Blízký východ*, p. 199.

17 AMFA, TO-T 1975–1979, Zpráva o působení čs. expertů v LAR, 27 December 1975, Libya — Box 1, File 262/111.

18 In December 1975, these were a total of nine experts (doctors, nurses, and university teachers). AMFA, TO-T 1975–1979, Zpráva o působení čs. expertů v LAR, 27 December 1975, Libya — Box, File 262/111.

19 Ibid.

20 There were direct flights going between Tripoli and Paris, so emigration was not too difficult for Czechoslovaks at first. Emigration of workers on the construction of the Nalut-Ghadames road was, in fact, nothing out of the ordinary. On the contrary, the available documents mention emigration as a common problem. SSA, HS-SNB, Zpráva k situaci na stavbě zahraniční investiční akce v Libyi: výstavba silnice Nalut Ghademes a Tourist Beach Country (turistické plážové středisko), 20 March 1971, Reg. No. 80743 I. S.

and obligations when going to Libya. For these reasons, among others, pressure from Prague to limit individual contracts with private Libyan companies increased after 1975. Czechoslovakia started pushing for monitored team trips only, with the experts then working in the Libyan public sector.²¹

During the second half of the 1970s, Czechoslovakia worked hard to improve the way it organized its expert teams visiting Libya. This is strongly evidenced by Prague's pressure on Tripoli to conclude a special framework protocol on the dispatch of experts, which was originally scheduled for signing in the spring of 1978.²² Coordination improvements were to concern mainly PZO Strojexport, as experts from the drilling section earned Czechoslovakia considerable amounts of money. With about 75 experts, Czechoslovakia enjoyed a profit of nearly 5 million US dollars in 1977 and thus saw great promise for the future in this sector.²³ For the same reason, Prague proceeded to increase the number of experts sent to Libya through Strojexport in the following years.

Cooperation with Tripoli further intensified after 1977, when Libya, under Gaddafi's Declaration of the Establishment of Authority of the People, saw a massive nationalization of previously private enterprises.²⁴ Centralization and nationalization of industry and agriculture suited Czechoslovakia both ideologically and in practice. During negotiations to deepen the countries' VTS, Libya asked for assistance in building dozens of cultivation farms, digging wells and building roads. Libya also requested for medical teams to run clinics in Tripoli and Benghazi.²⁵ Over the following years, Czechoslovakia tried to meet these requests, but was repeatedly met with delays with Libya finalizing the relevant contracts. The framework protocol, originally scheduled to be signed in the spring of 1978, was yet to be finalized. A breakthrough in terms of VTS came in 1979, when the Ministry of Health of the Czechoslovakia succeeded in sending 120 medical personnel to the Tripoli clinic to run the facility.²⁶

The discussion revolved not only around the involvement of Czechoslovak experts in Libya, but also around Libyans studying at universities in Czechoslovakia; in particular, the possibility of opening up a few spots at the University College of Agriculture in Prague (VŠZ) in the field of tropical and subtropical agriculture to Libyan students. These and other issues were discussed regularly at the semi-annual meetings of the Joint Committee on Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation.²⁷ At

21 AMFA, TO-T 1975–1979, Zpráva o působení čs. expertů v LAR 1976, 30 June 1976, Libya — Box 2, File 262/111, AMFA, TO-T 1975–1979, Informace o průběhu a výsledcích návštěvy ministra zahraničních věcí Chňoupek v Libyi ve dnech 11.–16. 12. 1977, Libya — Box 9, File 262/112, Agenda vzájemných styků.

22 AMFA, TO-T 1975–1979, Zpráva o působení čs. expertů v LAR za druhé pololetí roku 1977, 30 December 1977, Libya — Box 1, File 262/211.

23 AMFA, TO-T 1975–1979, Zpráva o působení čs. expertů v LAR za první pololetí roku 1977, 6 July 1977, Libya — Box 1, File 262/211.

24 NA, A-ÚV KSČ — Gustáv Husák, Libye — k současné vnitropolitické situace v zemi, 4 May 1978, Box 382, File 1151.

25 NA, A-ÚV KSČ — Gustáv Husák, Zpráva o oficiální přátelské návštěvě Muammara Kaddáfího, gen. taj. VLK LALSD v ČSSR ve dnech 20–23. 6. 1978, 29 June 1978, Box 382, File 1151.

26 AMFA, TO-T 1975–1979, Přehled a hodnocení technické pomoci a vědeckotechnické spolupráce mezi ČSSR a Libyí za I. pololetí 1979, 27 June 1979, Libya — Box 1, File 262/211.

27 Ibid.





the end of 1979, the available spots for Libyans at VŠZ were approved and cooperation between Prague and Tripoli deepened once again.

In the first half of the 1980s, VTS between Prague and Tripoli was at its peak. A total of 149 Czechoslovak health workers were working in the Libyan city of Misurata, and the number of experts sent by Strojexport increased to several hundred.²⁸ In 1981, an agreement on cooperation in the health sector was signed to speed up the transfer of experts and to support their work in Libya. The growing potential of Czechoslovak-Libyan relations was further supported by two state visits, namely the visit of Czechoslovak President Gustáv Husák to Tripoli in 1981 and that of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi to Prague the following year.

While the mutual will to cooperate was growing, the first major problem came to light, namely Libya's insolvency, triggered by an embargo imposed on Libya by the United States due to Gaddafi's support of international terrorism. Tripoli also found itself on the brink of conflict with Washington over sovereignty over the Gulf of Sirte.²⁹ Czechoslovakia's Strojexport repeatedly considered withdrawing its workers from Libya because of payment delays.³⁰ The situation continued to deteriorate, and Libya's political isolation marked the course of its VTS with Czechoslovakia. A major setback occurred between 1984 and 1986, when the Gaddafi regime found itself in the crosshairs of the Ronald Reagan administration, which ordered the bombing of Tripoli in the spring of 1986 to kill the Libyan leader.

The upward trend of Czechoslovak-Libyan cooperation did not resume until after 1987, when Libya's international standing and financial situation stabilized. This was reflected in Tripoli's renewed and increased interest in Czechoslovak experts, of whom some 460 were working in Libya in 1988 through PZO Polytechna.³¹ PZO Strojexport participated in the construction of a steel plant in Misurata, which was a very important investment for the future from the Czechoslovak point of view. However, efforts to increase the number of experts in Libya were being slowed down by another complication, this time on the Czechoslovak side — a drastic lack of vetted and aware personnel who were politically and linguistically competent and suitable for deployment.³² It can be assumed Prague was able to partially solve this problem, as just before the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, some 560 medical experts were present in Libya.³³

28 NA, A-ÚV KSČ — Gustáv Husák, Libya — činnost čs. expertů, 28 July 1981, Box 382, File 1151.

29 For a closer look at Gaddafi's support of terrorism and Libya's conflict with the US, see G. SIMONS, *Libya: The Struggle for Survival*, London, 1996, M. SICKER, *The Making of a Pariah State: The Adventurist Politics of Muammar Qaddafi*, New York: 1987. A. PARGETER, *Libya: The Rise and Fall of Qaddafi*, New Haven, 2012.

30 NA, A-ÚV KSČ — Gustáv Husák, Podklady k jednání při Kaddáfího návštěvě 1982, 25 August 1982, Box 383, File 1153.

31 280 of them were there as part of teams and 180 had individual contracts. AMFA, TO-T 1985–1989, Zpráva o vývoji čs.-libyjské hospodářské, vědecké a technické spolupráci a jejich perspektivách, 25 June 1988, Libya — Box 3, File 262/211.

32 Ibid.

33 AMFA, TO-T 1980–1989, Hodnocení plnění mezistátních dohod mezi ČSSR a Libyí, 30 October 1989, Libya — Box 1, File 262/111.

THE COUNTRY'S AMBASSADORS

A crucial question for this text is whether Czechoslovakia, in establishing relations with Libya, sought to present a socialist regime and the building of a modern state, or whether it focused more on promoting its own economy, businesses and goods. The role of Czechoslovak experts is crucial to answering this question, as expertise was one of Czechoslovakia's key exports. From the very beginning of the ČSSR's involvement in Libya, Prague exerted pressure to ensure that Czechoslovak state enterprises put down roots in the Libyan economy, which was rich due to oil exports. This was evident as early as during the construction of the aforementioned Nalut-Ghadames road, which was completed in December 1972. Despite the initial problems, Czechoslovak authorities saw the construction as a success, especially in terms of Libya's perception of Czechoslovak companies. Ambassador Štefan Uher reported to Prague on the very positive image of Czechoslovaks in Libyan society and on the 'popularization' of the concept of a *čikí* company.³⁴

However, the activities of all socialist states in Libya seemed problematic with regard to the ideological dimension of their activities, especially in the first half of the 1970s. Gaddafi issued a strict ban on the dissemination of socialist propaganda on Libyan territory and with it any ideological influence on Libyan citizens. It is remarkable how Czechoslovakia dealt with this obstacle without fundamentally compromising its own economic interests. Prague intended to comply with the ban on propaganda, but at the same time sought appropriate ways of "introducing the presence of socialist Czechoslovakia into the consciousness of Libyan society."³⁵ This shows that, while Prague did not formally abandon its socialist ideological basis, it primarily presented its goods and expertise.³⁶

As time passed, this reality started reflecting in Czechoslovak planning for economic engagement in Libya even more clearly. The experts sent by Czechoslovakia were to play a central role as actors in Czechoslovak economic modernization.³⁷ From Prague's point of view, it was particularly crucial to get Czechoslovak workers into "decisive Libyan economic organizations in which they can help develop Czechoslovak-Libyan economic relations and trade so that the interests of the Czechoslovak national economy can be better implemented in accordance with the needs and possibilities of our [Czechoslovak] production."³⁸ Once again, a clear effort to consolidate

34 Čikí is the phonetic transcription of an Arabic word that translates to "Czech." AMFA, TO-T 1970-1974, Ukončení výstavby silnice Nalut-Ghadames — alžírské hranice, 27 February 1973, Libya — Box 3, File 262/211.

35 AMFA, TO-T 1975-1979, Čs. velvyslanectví v Tripoli, 7 January 1975, Libya — Box 1, File 262/111.

36 The activities of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in Third World countries were of a similar nature. Cf. I. BOROWY, *Medicine, Economics and Foreign Policy*, p. 189.

37 For info on experts as actors of economic modernization, see, e.g. J. DE LA TORRE, M. d. MAR RUBIO-VARAS, G. SANZ LAFUENTE, *Engineers and Scientist as Commercial Agents of the Spanish Nuclear Programme*, in: D. PRETEL, L. CAMPRUBÍ (eds.), *Technology and Globalisation: Networks of Experts in World History*, Cham 2018, pp. 313-340.

38 AMFA, TO-T 1975-1979, Zpráva o působení čs. expertů v LAR 1976, 30 June 1976, Libya — Box 2, File 262/111.



the Czechoslovak position on the Libyan market was apparent, with Prague's interests the only ones being key (as opposed to the interests of the whole socialist camp).

Czechoslovakia's aim, however, stretched beyond self-presentation — the country sought to adjust the conditions in Libya itself to allow for better penetration of the ČSSR into the Libyan economy. This was to be helmed mainly by the expert teams sent under VTS after 1974. As mentioned, Prague preferred to send entire teams of experts rather than individuals. The reason for this was, in part, the considerably greater financial benefit of each expert to the treasury, but the political factor was what held real importance. Czechoslovak leadership considered sending larger teams of experts even at the cost of Prague having to subsidize their operation, because in the eyes of the communist government, each expert was also “the country's ambassador,” representing Czechoslovakia and thus adding to the prestige of the Czechoslovak economy abroad.³⁹

The presentation of Czechoslovak successes in Libya was, of course, also reflected in the domestic environment, especially in the daily press. From the very beginning of the countries' VTS, regular reports of the involvement of experts and workers in Libya appeared in Czechoslovak newspapers. The drilling section of experts sent through PZO Strojexport on behalf of Geoindustrrie was written about the most.⁴⁰ Daily newspapers *Rudé právo* and *Svobodné slovo* tended to focus on highlighting the achievements of Czechoslovaks in the modernization of Libya, with no mention of the building of socialism.

It is clear from the above that Czechoslovakia's primary concern in Libya was more about improving its own economic position than promoting the ideology of socialism or building an economic system on the model of the Soviet Union. Not even Gaddafi's opposition to communism and the USSR could stop Prague's efforts to break into the Libyan market, which clearly shows that ideological arguments were not of the utmost importance to Czechoslovaks. The problematic nature of the declared socialist cooperation and solidarity was also demonstrated in another area, namely the clashes and competition between the individual Eastern Bloc countries on Libyan territory.

BROTHERLY COMPETITION

Naturally, Gaddafi's coup in Libya opened up new possibilities not only for Czechoslovakia, but also for other socialist states. Some of them, such as Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, had solidified their position in Libya before 1969, and Gaddafi's coup allowed them to break into the Libyan economy even more intensively. Their aim was to create a favorable environment for the realization of their own economic interests and

³⁹ AMFA, TO-T 1975–1979, Informace o průběhu a výsledcích návštěvy ministra zahraničních věcí Chňouпка v Libyi ve dnech 11.-16. 12. 1977, Libya — Box 9, File 262/112, Agenda vzájemných styků.

⁴⁰ See NA, MZV-VA, II. Czechoslovakia, *Rudé právo*: Významná pomoc československých odborníků rozvoji Libye — Hledání klíče k životu, 16. July 1978, Inv. No. 7948, Czechoslovakia-Libya 1972–1979; NA, MZV-VA, II. Czechoslovakia, *Svobodné slovo*: Geoindustrrie, 28 July 1976, Inv. No. 7948, Czechoslovakia-Libya 1972–1979.



to fill the newly vacant positions in the decisive planning bodies of the Libyan administration. Initially, the ČSSR was far behind the other Warsaw Pact states in this regard, especially when compared to the Polish People's Republic (PPR) and the Bulgarian People's Republic (BPR). Both Warsaw and Sofia had been sending their workers and qualified experts to Libya by the hundreds since the early 1970s. The Bulgarians went as far as to conclude an economic cooperation agreement with the Libyans with a most-favored-nation clause and a protocol on experts.⁴¹ Poland, although mostly supplying construction workers to Libya, also gradually occupied advisory positions in Libyan government committees.⁴²

Czechoslovakia's efforts to catch up to its allies in Libya faced numerous obstacles, one of which, at least if available sources are accurate, was of confessional nature. Czechoslovaks were, according to their own interpretation, disadvantaged by their atheism, and this was because Gaddafi presented himself as a religiously fervent leader, while Czechoslovak leaders were mostly non-religious. In contrast, Poles, who identified as Catholics, enjoyed advantages in Libya, including lucrative contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars.⁴³ This hypothesis comes entirely from the Czechoslovak perspective and it might only be an excuse the Czechoslovak administration used to justify its failure.

But Czechoslovak representatives' frustration was also evident when it came to Bulgarian involvement in Libya. Bulgaria had concluded a number of contracts with Tripoli, Bulgarian companies were involved in the construction of the city's airport complex, and some 580 civilian experts from the BPR were present in Libya in the mid-1970s. In response to this observation, the relevant news reports contained captions such as "What About Us?!", "Instead of Us?," or "Crazy, Isn't It?!" Prague naturally did not show much sympathy and understanding for the brotherly state's achievements in the LAR — quite the opposite.⁴⁴

The financial aspect also became a major obstacle to Czechoslovak activities in Libya. Czechoslovak experts received much higher compensation than Poles, Bulgarians, and Romanians.⁴⁵ This compensation gap divided Eastern Bloc countries and was the subject of several meetings of the respective ambassadors in Tripoli. The competition between Eastern Bloc countries was most evident in the field of health-care, as Poles and Bulgarians were sending their doctors and nurses to Libya under unfavorable terms, which reduced Czechoslovak hopes of concluding their own contracts. The experts Czechoslovakia had sent to Libya through Polytechna up to that point brought their home country very negligible profits until the end of the 1970s.⁴⁶

41 AMFA, TO-T 1970–1974, Záznam rozhovoru s bulharským velvyslancem Borisem Christovem, 19 February 1972, Libya — Box 3, File 262/211.

42 AMFA, TO-T 1970–1974, Národohospodářský plán Libye, 6 November 1972, Libya — Box 3, File 262/211.

43 AMFA, TO-T 1970–1974, Zpráva pro kolegium — ZÚ Libye, 31 May 1973, Libya — Box 3, File 262/112.

44 AMFA, TO-T 1970–1974, Návštěva bulharské delegace vedení ministrem Nikolajem Žiševev v LAR, 7 July 1972, Libya — Box 3, File 262/211.

45 The salary of experts from the CSSR ranged from LYD 180 to 350 a week. *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*



It should be noted that, unlike other Eastern Bloc countries, Czechoslovakia sent virtually no unskilled labor to Libya, but concentrated exclusively on sending out experts. There were several reasons for this, mainly the fact that cheap labor was supplied to Libya by Poland and Bulgaria, and that Gaddafi relied on workers from Asian countries. Czechoslovakia also had no workers to spare and therefore focused on exporting expertise.⁴⁷

Although there were indications of possible coordination of Eastern Bloc action in Libya in terms of expert salaries and other organizational matters, the countries never adopted a common approach. The individual action of Poland, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia hindered the socialist states' efforts to break into Libya and, in the long run, made it impossible for the socialist states to compete with the capitalist countries that were heavily involved in Libya.⁴⁸

WORKING IN THE "FANATICAL ARAB WORLD"⁴⁹

The life of the experts living in Libya was quite complicated and had considerable pitfalls. The experts had to set off to an essentially unknown location and enter a completely different cultural and social environment. Borowy states that it was the 'exotic' nature of the location and the possibility of learning about new cultures that may have motivated the experts' travel, but these Czechoslovaks were often quickly 'cured' of their initial enthusiasm.⁵⁰ Due to the nature of this text's sources, we will focus here mainly on the work-related problems these Czechoslovak experts faced in Libya.

A major problem at virtually all sites where Czechoslovak experts were present was poor workplace discipline.⁵¹ The low morale was reflected in the quality of the work done — reports on the construction of the Nalut-Ghadames road describe the end product as being of 'poor quality.' Insufficient 'political awareness' was another common problem. According to reports, this was manifested by listening to 'hostile' radio stations such as Free Europe or Voice of America.⁵² More serious, however, was the relatively frequent emigration of workers via the direct Tripoli-Paris air route. For this reason, workplaces later resorted to confiscating the workers' travel documents.⁵³

47 AMFA, TO-T 1970–1979, Politická zpráva o aktivitě ZSS v LAR, 15 April. 1976, Libya — Box 1, File 262/311.

48 There was presumably no coordination between Eastern Bloc countries in terms of sending civilian experts to Third World countries. See BOROWY, *Medicine, Economics and Foreign Policy*, p. 189.

49 This is how Ambassador Štefan Uher described the situation in Libya. AMFA, TO-T 1970–1974, Situace v čs. kolonii v LAR, 24 October 1972, Libya — Box 3, File 262/211.

50 BOROWY, *Medicine, Economics and Foreign Policy*, p. 179.

51 SSA, HS-SNB, Zpráva k situaci na stavbě zahraniční investiční akce v Libyi: výstavba silnice Nalut Ghademes a Tourist Beach Country (turistické plážové středisko), 20 March 1971, Reg. No. 80743 I. S.

52 SSA, HS VKR-SNB, III. Správa SNB (A 30), Poznatky k akci „L“ získané vytažením prostředka VKR po návratu z nej, 28 December 1987, „Záznamy ze schůzek — akce Litomyšl“.

53 SSA, HS VKR-SNB, III. Správa SNB (A 30), Miroslav Kříž — informace, 15 March 1987, „Záznamy ze schůzek — akce Litomyšl“.



Another significant factor causing numerous problems was the criminal activities of Czechoslovak employees. This mostly involved them engaging in the production, sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages. The strict laws of Libya as an Islamic republic prohibited and punished consumption of alcohol.⁵⁴ In September 1970, two Czechoslovak citizens were arrested, led away from their construction site and taken into custody for selling alcohol.

From the very beginning of Czechoslovak involvement in Libya, it was clear that the biggest problem facing the experts there was legal protection. Czechoslovakia demanded that a consular agreement as well as a legal cooperation agreement be concluded after nearly every major offense committed against Czechoslovak citizens, or by Czechoslovak citizens against Libyan nationals or their property.⁵⁵ Alcohol production aside, some of these issues were of much more serious nature, such as Czechoslovak workers' wives being raped by Libyans. These cases, like many cases of offenses committed by Czechoslovaks, saw no successful legal resolution.⁵⁶ Some Czechoslovak citizens in Libya were also suspected of "bribery, embezzlement and theft of property."⁵⁷ These transgressions fundamentally undermined not only their work life but also the prestige of the ČSSR in Libya. Despite recurring problems and conflicts, appropriate legal agreements to help resolve the situation were never concluded.

The numerous disagreements also affected the relations between Czechoslovak workers and Libyans, which were in no way outstanding. Frequent disputes between Czechoslovaks and locals were recorded at individual workplaces.⁵⁸ Libyans, for example, frequently complained about the quality of goods from Czechoslovakia, the standard of which, in their opinion, was not comparable to that of the West.⁵⁹ The Libyans' negative view extended to Czechoslovak workers themselves as well — Libyans repeatedly referred to people from the ČSSR as "poor Europeans."⁶⁰

The financial compensation of Czechoslovak workers in Libya, which was above standard compared to other Eastern Bloc countries, also served as motivation for Czechoslovak experts. However, the experts were often asked to do more work than they were subsequently paid for. In addition to their salaries, Czechoslovaks received free accommodation in Libya from the mid-1970s onward, but even this proved

54 SSA, HS-SNB, Telegram z Tripoli, 18 September 1970, Reg. No. 80743 I. S.

55 AMFA, TO-T 1970–1974, Situace v čs. kolonii v LAR, 24 October 1972, Libya — Box 3, File 262/211.

56 Ibid.

57 SSA, HS-SNB, Operativní plán kontrarozvědné obrany československé účasti na mezinárodním veletrhu v Tripolisu, March 1971, Reg. No. 80743 I. S.

58 One of the most common phrases aimed at Libyans in these situations was "Go to hell, you little thief." AMFA, TO-T 1970–1974, Jedináková zpráva o kontrole stavby silnice Nalut-Ghadames, 23 July 1971, Libya — Box 3, File 262/211.

59 SSA, HS VKR-SNB, III. Správa SNB (A 30), Cesta příslušníků FMNO na požadavek Omnipol/HTS do Libye, 2 March 1988, „Písemnosti z akce Litomyšl“.

60 HS VKR-SNB — svazky, část fondu „VKR — různé“, „Poznatkové karty Litomyšl — vytěžení“, Agent Cyril — vytěžení po návratu z Libya, 6 October 1986, Box 1149 (186/10), Section VKR 4. A.



inadequate. Housing, which was generally of sub-standard quality, was in short supply and so dedicated camps with trailers had to be erected.⁶¹

The living and working conditions of Czechoslovak experts improved only slowly and, from Prague's point of view, never met European standards. Conflicts with Libyans, the hostile social and cultural environment and the strictness of internal Libyan regulations made the experts' work difficult.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the available documents that communist Czechoslovakia tried until the last moment to strengthen cooperation with the Gaddafi regime on the scientific and technical level, despite the fact that the Soviet Union had severed virtually all ties with Tripoli in 1985. This was mainly due to Gaddafi's political adventurism and his questioning of Gorbachev's perestroika.⁶² The late 1980s marked a brief upsurge in Czechoslovakia's attempts to restart VTS on as large a scale as possible, but by 1989 it was clear that the Czechoslovak communist regime would face more serious challenges at home. Until the very last moment, however, Prague was interested in Libya, as evidenced by a wealth of documentation, especially on the countries' bilateral relations. Czechoslovakia concluded trade protocols with Libya for the following years, but these were never implemented as the communist regime in Czechoslovakia collapsed in late 1989.⁶³

This study aimed to analyze the course, objectives, and impact of scientific and technical cooperation between Czechoslovakia and Libya. In the introduction, major issues were raised, mainly concerning the promotion of the CSSR in Libya and the competition among Eastern Bloc countries in breaking into the Libyan market. There is plenty of room for additional exploration in this area, such as researching the funds concerning Czechoslovak experts in the Security Services Archive or collecting the testimonies of relevant experts who are still alive today. Nevertheless, this study offered at least partial answers to these questions. We can conclude that the primary aim of Czechoslovakia was not to present a socialist vision of a modern economy to Libya, but to present itself, its goods and expertise. Prague was interested in creating an environment in Libya that would allow for a prospective and easy entry of Czechoslovak state-owned enterprises into the Libyan market and Libyan management institutions. Czechoslovakia did this without consulting or coordinating with the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact states. While this gave Czechoslovakia the opportunity for autonomous action, it also exposed Eastern Bloc countries to the problem of mutual competition, which undermined the overall scope and importance of these states' scientific and technical cooperation with Libya as well as their other activities in the country.

⁶¹ NA, A-ÚV KSČ — Gustáv Husák, Libya — činnost čs. expertů, 28 July 1981, Box 382, File 1151.

⁶² AMFA, TO-T 1985–1989, Sovětská přestavba a politika libyjského vedení, 17 April 1989, Libya — Box 1, File 262/111.

⁶³ AMFA, TO-T 1980–1989, Hodnocení plnění mezistátních dohod mezi ČSSR a Libyí, 30 October 1989, Libya — Box 1, 262/111.

Overall, Czechoslovakia's VTS with Libya primarily brought the ČSSR economic profit. Between 10 and 20 percent of each expert's salary went directly into the Czechoslovak treasury, which constituted a desirable and considerable supply of hard currency. It is difficult to estimate the overall profit generated by the cooperation, as we only have access to partial figures, but it is safe to assume that thanks to the VTS program, at least tens, if not hundreds, of millions of US dollars were put into the Czechoslovak treasury over the entire period under review.

As far as representation, Czechoslovakia did not see nearly as much success as is apparent from the above, but Prague showed that it was willing and able to send out quality experts from various sectors. However, the uncoordinated approach of the socialist states, the frequent disapproval of Libyan customers and the erratic policies of Muammar Gaddafi made any efforts to gain a deeper foothold in the Libyan economic apparatus virtually impossible.

