

Dimitrios K. Apostolopoulos
Senior Researcher – Academy of Athens
<http://www.academyofathens.gr/researchers/apostolopoulos>
dapost@academyofathens.gr / +30-6972095840

Δημήτρης Κ. Αποστολόπουλος
Κύριος Ερευνητής
Κέντρο Ερεύνης Ιστορίας του Νεωτέρου Ελληνισμού (KEINE)
Ακαδημία Αθηνών

The Gastarbeiter policy in post-war Germany

Paper presented in the 3rd International Conference in Economic and Social History “*Labour History: production, markets, relations, policies (from the late Middle ages to the early 21st century)*”, which organized by the Greek Economic History Association and the Department of History & Archaeology of the University of Ioannina (Ioannina, 24-27 May 2017). Posted in the website www.hdoisto.gr, May 2018.

Summary

This paper is based on primary sources from German archives and focuses on the organisation and development of the migration flow from Mediterranean countries to Western Germany during the early post-war period, with particular regard to the Greek example as it is documented in the German archives. This emigration flow took place after the official interstate agreements (i.e. of March 1960 for the Greek-German agreement) and those emigrants were called “guest-workers”-“Gastarbeiter”.

The migrant workers believed that the German Federal Republic would offer higher living standards to themselves and their children. In reality however, their lives were determined by the needs and interests of the country of origin and the host country. The former hurried to unburden itself from labour workforces it could not absorb, in order to reduce the unemployment rate and to start receiving money transfers, while the latter had to cover the industries’ growing need for manpower.

The main difficulties arose from the fact that both governments did not take into account the human factor: indeed, the migrants of the 1960s could only entry the host country with a special permit and work wherever they would be placed and with any remuneration, whilst their families went through a difficult period of separation, material deprivation and social discrimination, living –at the beginning- in not always decent collective accommodation homes (Heim) and ghettos.

With the justification of a provisory situation, German services avoided to grant the migrant workers any kind of political rights. Germany was especially eager to avoid any injustice towards German workers as e.g. the German commission in Greece could give out only those workplaces which would not be destined to the national working forces. The same foreigners’ law of the 28th April 1965 mentioned that the residence permit could only be handed out if the presence of the migrant would not harm the interest of the German Federal Republic. The foreign worker was placed only in work places considered of lower value by the employer.

Even the term “Gastarbeiter” had a pejorative connotation. This was even confirmed after 1970 by the Federal President Gustav Heinemann and the Chancellor Willy Brandt when they proposed to eliminate the discriminations against the *Gastarbeiter*.

During the recent economic crisis, the new increasing migratory wave of Greeks leaving for abroad renders the chapter on the Greek immigration topical again. This time however, the flow does not concern unqualified workers seeking their fortune in the German factories, but rather young, qualified people with expertise allowing them to work in high-level and better paid workplaces.

After World War II, Greece went through one of the most difficult periods of its history. The unemployment, the social instability and the poverty characterised the financially lower social levels of the Greek population. The significantly high urbanisation of the late 1950s led to both underemployment in the agricultural sector and unemployment in the cities. Therefore it was no surprise that the Greeks belonged to the first European South-North post-war migration flow.

The post war employment of the Greeks in Western Europe offered them for the first time the possibility to escape from the poverty of their villages, without definitely abandoning their home country. West Germany offered them new working and development opportunities in its industrial regions, together with favourable rotation and return conditions. The home country would remain within reach for the Greek migrants and the emigration risk appeared controllable.

On the other hand, Germany, having been an emigration country since the late 19th century, would transform into an immigration country. Indeed, after absorbing 13 million displaced people after WWII, the newly founded Federal Republic of Germany definitely became a receiving state in the 1950s and 1960s by welcoming foreign migrant workers from the Mediterranean region. These workers were called “Gastarbeiter” – which means “guest-workers” – because their presence was only considered as provisory. The recruitment agreements were first signed with Italy (1955), Spain and Greece (1960) and later on with Turkey (1961), Morocco (1963), Portugal (1964), Tunisia (1965) and Yugoslavia (1968).

The negotiations on the signature of a bilateral agreement between Bonn and Athens for the emigration of workers to Germany gained priority in the second half of the 1950s together with other bilateral financial negotiations. However, for fear of adverse internal political reactions, Greece postponed the signature. Only after the Greek elections of 1958 and with the ministerial change at the Greek Employment Ministry, did the German Embassy in Athens observe a positive shift, since the Greek

general director of the Ministry reassured members of the German Embassy that he would strive to facilitate the conclusion of this agreement.¹

On 30 March 1960, the Agreement between the government of the Federal Republic of Germany and the government of the Kingdom of Greece on the recruitment and the placement of Greek workers in the German Republic was signed in Bonn. The preamble of the agreement referred to the wish of both governments to enhance the bilateral relations and friendship bonds for the benefit of both countries. Furthermore, in the spirit of European solidarity, it stated their wish to increase the employment percentage as well as the productivity in order to promote financial and social progress in the mutual interest of their people. In accordance with the agreement, a German recruitment committee settled in Athens, the number of applications at the German Embassy increased to 400-500 daily and thus, at the end of July 1960, 12.000 Greek workers had already been sent to Germany. The German Ambassador in Athens, Mr. Seelos, noted in a memorandum to Bonn that this high interest in finding employment in Germany only confirmed the very importance of the implementation of the agreement for the internal political scene.²

The German-Greek Agreement on the unemployment insurance, signed on 31 May 1960, granted equal unemployment insurance and benefits to the nationals of both contracting states.³ One year later, the Agreement on Social Security, which covered the health, pension, accident insurances as well as the child allowances, was signed on 25 April 1961. It was soon completed by the complementary agreement of 28 March 1962, which, according to its article 48, came into force on the 1st February 1964.⁴

Consequently, a new era started for the Greek emigration. Not only was the previous overseas destination of the Greek migrants (USA, Canada and Australia) replaced by Europe with the agreement of 1960, but for the first time, this working migration would also be of a massive size. According to German governmental sources of the time, the number of Greek workers in Western Germany steadily increased in the first half of the 1960s and only gradually decreased (by approx. 25%) after 1967 because

¹ Bericht der Botschaft der BRD in Athen, Nr. 771/58, 31.7.1958, στο: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PAAA), Ref. 206, Bd. 133.

² Bericht der Botschaft Athen (505-83 Ber. Nr. 527/60), 22.4.1960, στο: PAAA, Ref. 206, Bd. 127.

³ Bulletin des Presse- und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung, Nr. 91, 14.5.1960, σ. 904 και Bulletin des Presse- und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung, Nr. 120, 15.7.1961, σ. 1259.

⁴ Bulletin des Presse- und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung, Nr. 66, 5.4.1962, σ. 554, Bulletin des Presse- und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung, Nr. 3, 7.1.1964, σ. 28. Επίσης, εφημ. Frankfurter Rundschau, εφημ. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, εφημ. Stuttgarter Zeitung, 26.4.1961 και εφημ. Industriekurier, 3.5.1961.

of the military putsch in Greece and the general economic recession until the end of the decade. Soon, Greece took the first place as a country of emigrating workers, before Italy, Spain and Turkey. The 60.000 Greek guest-workers of April 1962 increased to 90.000 until November of the same year. The Greek authorities estimated that the number increased to 140.000 in 1963, to 170.000 in 1965 and 196.000 in 1966. More than one third, 77.800 guest-workers, were women. The German Foreign Office noticed that more than 2% of the total population (estimated at 8 million at the time) was working in Germany and hence millions of dollars were transferred to Greece in order to support its national economy.⁵

Altogether, from 1960 until 1973 – when Germany released a recruitment ban for foreign employees – hundreds of thousands of Greeks moved to the Federal Republic of Germany. Thousands of Families and entire villages were torn apart and moved away from their homeland. The main reasons for this great migration flow were financial, as well as social and political. The emigrants were hoping to solve their problems in West Germany. They would no longer stay at the margins of society and would seek more rights for themselves and their children.

For Germany, the immigration changed the proportion of foreigners in the resident population, which increased from 1.2% in 1960 to more than 4.9% in 1970 due to the *Gastarbeiter* policy. However, due to the economic recession from 1966 to 1969, the employment of foreigners decreased by approximately one third to 0.9 Million. Following a short increase, the number decreased again after the oil price shock of 1973 and the subsequent global economic crisis.

In 1973, the German government released a recruitment ban („Anwerbestopp“) in order to stop the state organised labour migration and the arrival of new migrant workers. At the time of the recruitment ban, 2.6 million guest-workers were employed in the Federal Republic.

The recruitment ban of 1973 confronted the guest-workers which did not originate from an EEC-State with the dilemma of either leaving Germany and return to their home-country, or to prepare for a long-term stay and to bring their families along. The second phase of the so-called “Ausländerpolitik” – i.e. immigration policy, lasting from 1973 to 1979, was mostly characterised by the family reunification. The

⁵ Bericht der Botschaft Athen (Nr. 1742/63), 27.11.1963, PA AA, Ref. 206, Bd. 158, Brief des Referats III A 5 – 80.01/1-94.08 an das Referat IA4 (Betreff: Dienstinstruktion für den deutschen Botschafter in Athen), 30.12.1964, στο: PAAA, Ref. III A 5, Bd. 451 και εφημ. *Industriekurier*, 20.1.1966.

spouses and children of the migrants to Germany needed a residence and reunification permit according to the “Ausländergesetz” (immigration act) of 1965.

It is the recruitment ban that virtually led to the massive family reunification flows, since it became the only allowed immigration type. Germany provided an integration policy which would offer the migrant families better settlement opportunities

The fate of the emigrants of the first period till the mid-1970s was determined by the needs and interests of the countries of origin and of destination. The former were in a hurry to be freed from a significant part of the working force in order to reduce unemployment and to start receiving money transfers, while the latter needed to cover the increasing workers-demands of the industry.

The advantages also carried along a series of difficulties and problems. For the entire Greek people, the emigration of the “guest-workers” had a negative connotation. Only the daring Greeks registered more easily to an employment abroad. The state of health of the candidates was thoroughly examined and they were selected accordingly. The politically unreliable were not granted a passport and would therefore not have the possibility to leave the country. Epirus, Macedonia and Thrace were the economically poorest regions of Greece and there, the interest for employment in Germany was the most important. In fact, during the 1960s and 1970s, not a single person of the younger generation could be found in some Epirotic and Macedonian villages since they were working in Germany. A direct repercussion of the migration flow was therefore the lack of working forces in the Greek agricultural sector, especially during harvest times, due to both the emigration and the over aged population.⁶

At the same time, the German employers mostly appreciated these undemanding, hardworking forces from South Europe. During the so-called German Economic Miracle, as well as during the recession, the *Gastarbeiter* assumed important buffer functions since the rotation principle theoretically ensured that the right number of migrant workers was present in accordance with the German industry’s needs of the moment. It may well be said that no economic miracle could have taken place in such a short period of time without the use of the guest-workers.

At a societal level, people from different social orders – on one hand agrarian societies, used to strong family bonds and local networks and on the other hand

⁶ Basil Mathiopoulos, «Die wirtschaftliche und soziale Lage im heutigen Griechenland», *Bundesarbeitsblatt* 15-16/1967, σ. 396, στο: Archiv für Christlich-Demokratische Politik (ACDP), Sankt Augustin, Lfd. Nr. I-026-023/1.

mostly urban, industrialized societies – had to start to live together and get accustomed to each other. This sometimes led to adaptation difficulties, moral and human conflicts as well as discriminatory behaviour towards the migrants. Indeed, even the choice of the appellation “guest-worker” was not a random one.

Firstly, the presence of the foreign workers from the Mediterranean was considered by Germany to be only temporary. Secondly, in the first decades of this immigration policy, the Federal Government accepted only a certain category of migrant workers, especially young, unqualified people, which would live in barracks and collective accommodations with mostly deplorable living conditions. Thirdly, the first guest-worker agreements were predicated on the philosophy of the “rotation principle”, according to which the workers would be granted only temporary residence permits in order to be sent back to their home country and their presence was aligned with the needs of the economy and the labour market. Since the “rotation principle” did not effectively function and the residence times were visibly prolonged, family reunification and the permanent settlement of the migrants started. However, the social consequences of the permanent presence of the guest-workers in the German cities were not a subject of political discussion yet.

One of the major social consequences was the question of educational integration of migrant children and young people into the national education system. In 1964, the German Conference of Education Ministers decided for equal education possibilities for the migrants’ children and the “mother tongue”-school attendance (the so-called “muttersprachlicher Unterricht”) was put into place in order to prepare the migrants for a possible return to their home countries. In this sense, although the German side considered that the migrants’ children should get integrated into the German school system, the uncertainty about the residence status called for the organization of native education classes. Indeed, the economic recession led to a fall of the foreigners’ occupation between 1966 and 1969, and again after the oil price shock of 1973, when the Federal government decided to release the recruitment stop in order to limit the working immigration.⁷

The guest-worker question had raised many internal debates inside the Greek Parliament of the 1960s, which were closely observed by the German Embassy in

⁷ Hartmut Esser, «Gastarbeiter», *Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Geschichte in drei Bänden* (Hrsg. von Wolfgang Benz). Band 2: Gesellschaft. Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1983, σ. 134.

Athens. The political value of the workers' emigration was closely tied to the question of the possible return of these working forces to Greece. The Karamanlis government signed the Agreement on the placement of the guest-workers in March 1960, and started the emigration flow, without however having a precise plan on their future return. The Center-party used this gap offered by the lack of a precise plan by the ERE party. In particular during the election campaign of 1963, did the party chairman Papandreou criticise again and again that the government had compelled the best workers to leave the country and to sell their manpower abroad.⁸ Although he repeatedly stressed ahead of the elections that he would make sure that the Greek youth could stay in the country, when he was appointed as Prime Minister he declared that he knew he could not close the borders!⁹

The emigration of the 1960s was necessary to both countries. The occurring problems were clearly due to the fact that both governments did not take the "human" factor into account. The guest-worker was only seen as manpower or as a foreign currency source. Though they sacrificed their own life, both the Greek and the German side most often ignored the "human" problems of the guest-workers. The emigrants of the 1960s and 1970s and their families did face a difficult period of separation, material deprivation and social discrimination, living – especially at the beginning – in miserable facilities and ghettos.

In the first decade, the German authorities did not officially recognize that Germany was a receiving country for emigrants. With the justification of their temporary status, they were not granted any political or social rights. Instead of giving them equal rights, the authorities applied the *Ausländergesetz* (literally meaning Act on Foreigners) and used the workers for the demanding job positions the Germans did not wish to fill. It was indeed important to Germany that the recruitment of foreign workforces would not affect the German workforce negatively. Only such positions should be announced to the German committee in Greece, which could not be occupied by the internal workforce. Also, the guest-worker would only be granted positions which were valued inferiorly by the local population.

The President of the federal employment office of the time had given an explicit suggestion to his subordinate personnel. In a memorandum he noted: "the recruitment

⁸ Bericht der Botschaft Athen (Nr. 1742/63), 27.11.1963, Bericht der Botschaft Athen (206-81- Ber. Nr. 1864/63), 21.12.1963, στο: PAAA, Ref. 206, Bd. 158.

⁹ Bericht der Botschaft Athen (206-81- Ber. Nr. 1864/63), 21.12.1963, στο: PAAA, Ref. 206, Bd. 158.

of Greek workers should only take place when the declared working need by the employer cannot be covered by the recruitment of an adequate national workforce. The efforts for labour placement of the Germans should not be influenced by the arrival of Greek workers... I therefore ask you to ensure that if a Greek happens to be paid by his employer with a salary higher than average, this should also be a precondition for the German worker so that he does not feel wronged".¹⁰

The *Ausländergesetz* - Act on Foreigners of 28 April 1965 (which mainly provided for the residence permit) presented an official racist dimension. The key provision of paragraph 2 stated: "The residence permit can only be granted if the presence of the foreigner does not affect the interest of the Federal Republic of Germany".¹¹ The guest-worker could enter Germany with a special authorization and should work anywhere needed and at any rate. He was allowed to live in places humanly so degrading, no German would accept to live in. Even the term "Gastarbeiter" composed of "Gast" and "Arbeiter" (guest-worker) which was introduced into the German terminology since the 1960s had a negative connotation linked to inferiority, and still remains a pejorative synonym to a "poor fellow". It is noteworthy that when the Federal President Heinemann and the Federal chancellor Brand asked for the elimination of the discriminations against the guest-workers, they did no less than confirm the existence of such discriminations.

Today, the Greeks are the fourth biggest immigration group in Germany, after the Turks, Italian and Polish. Among them, numerous pensioners are the *Gastarbeiter* of the 1960s and 1970s, who visit Greece for summer holidays, but prefer to live in Germany for the winter, while their children and grandchildren also live there.

A recent research shows that the number of Greeks choosing to live and work in Germany after 2010 is steadily increasing. Thus a new wave of emigration has begun with the hope of better paid employment positions. In this respect, an analysis made by the regional development and politics research team of the University of Macedonia shows that Germany is the third immigration country (with a rate of 6.6%, after the UK with 31.7% and the USA with 28.7%) preferred by the young people

¹⁰ Gabi Müller – Ballin, (επιμ.), *Ξενιτιά - Fremde. Griechinnen und Griechen in Nürnberg 1960 – 1996. Erinnerungen – Stationen – Berichte*. BZ-Materialien - Bd. 3, Bildungszentrum Stadt Nürnberg 1996, σ. 26.

¹¹ Gugel, Günther, *Ausländer, Aussiedler, Übersiedler. Fremdenfeindlichkeit in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Tübingen, 1990, σ. 31.

(mostly qualified, with a university degree) who leave Greece.¹² Under other terms and in different circumstances, history seems to repeat itself.

¹² [http:// www.uom.gr/rdpru](http://www.uom.gr/rdpru)