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# Cold War Austria and Migration from Eastern Europe: Refugees and Labor Migrants

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## Abstract

This article revisits Austria's migration history from the end of World War II until the end of the Cold War. Recent research has challenged the persistently commemorated welcoming Austrian attitude toward refugees who had been living under communism. The initial humanitarian efforts in 1956 and 1968, respectively, were remarkable. However, an analysis beyond the first weeks of both events reveals that (though to different degrees) public and political attitudes toward refugees took a negative turn. Throughout the 1970s, asylum for dissidents was portrayed as a continuation of the country's humanitarian tradition. However, in 1981, refugees from Poland were immediately perceived as unwanted labor migrants. In 1989/90, the scenario was similar: while the transiting East German refugees were welcomed, migrants from other countries (like Romania) were not. In the early 1990s, Austria decided on a reform of its asylum and foreigner policies. But when and why did the (supposedly welcome) refugees from countries under communist rule turn into unwelcome labor migrants? The analysis in this article explores the potential impact of the age of détente and the repercussions of the 1970s economic crises and the resulting end to active recruitment of foreign workers.

**Keywords:** Cold War; Austria; migration; refugees

Modern migration history emphasizes that it is impossible to make a strict distinction between political refugees and other migrants. Austria's migration history in the postwar era is a good case in point. To understand Austrian politics concerning labor migration, it is vital to examine the larger phenomenon of refugees arriving in the country after World War II and subsequent refugee moments during the Cold War. A long-term assessment from the end of World War II until the early 1990s shows the interconnectedness of Austria's diverse migration history and reveals several causes for the changes that occurred during the Cold War. Throughout that era, Austria was a country of immigration. From the mid-1940s until recently, 4.5 million migrants entered the country, with 1.3 million of them settling there. In addition to the up to 1.65 million refugees in postwar Austria, at least 350,000 of whom stayed, labor migration and its long-term consequences (including family reunifications) have contributed the greatest number of migrants to the Austrian population since the 1960s. Refugee movements and labor migration from Eastern and Southeastern Europe have had the most significant share in this development. However, politics and large parts of society were in denial about this reality and permanently insisted the contrary by repeating their mantra that Austria is not a country of immigration. Not surprisingly, this stance shaped the country's responses to the arrival of refugees and attitudes toward labor migration. In contrast to the vivid, glorifying memory of Austria's merits in certain refugee moments during the Cold War, negative responses to the arrival of refugees tend to be forgotten and long-term migration processes (such as labor migration) are scarcely mentioned in general or popular narratives of the country's Cold War history.<sup>1</sup>

To this day, Austrian politicians and media explicitly reference a positive memory of the Austrian response to the various "waves of refugees" from neighboring communist countries. Recent research

<sup>1</sup>Dirk Rupnow, "The History and Memory of Migration in Post-War Austria: Current Trends and Future Challenges," in *Migration in Austria (Contemporary Austrian Studies 26)*, eds. Günter Bischof and Dirk Rupnow (New Orleans, 2017), 37–65.

has challenged this persistent myth. A brief critical but balanced assessment of the state of the field on the history of Austria as a Cold War refuge could now read as follows: Of course, the initial humanitarian efforts after the Soviet crackdown on the Hungarian revolution in 1956 and the Warsaw Pact's crushing of the "Prague Spring" in 1968 were remarkable and indispensable from the Western Cold War perspective. However, Austria always wanted to serve as a transit country only, and an analysis beyond the first weeks of both events reveals that public and political attitudes toward refugees took a negative turn (albeit to different degrees).<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 1970s, asylum for dissidents (like the signatories of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia) and the reception of refugees from the Global South (for example, Chileans after the coup against Salvador Allende or Boat People from Indochina) were portrayed as a continuation of the country's humanitarian tradition.<sup>3</sup> However, by the time refugees from Poland arrived in Austria before the imposition of martial law in December 1981, the discourse had changed fundamentally: They were immediately perceived as unwanted labor migrants.<sup>4</sup> In 1989/90, the scenario was similar: while the transiting East German refugees were welcomed, people from other countries (such as Romania) were not.<sup>5</sup> This article provides a critical overview of the most crucial refugee and labor migration movements to Austria in the Cold War era and points to their interconnectedness as a way of enhancing our understanding of the changes that occurred in the period under investigation.

### Postwar and Cold War

In 1945/46 (a period for which statistical data is problematic and incomplete), up to 1.65 million people were stranded in Austria. This was more than a quarter of the total Austrian population of the time. Usually summarized under the label Displaced Persons (DPs), the group consisted of former forced laborers and Prisoners of War who had been brought to Austrian territory under Nazi rule, Holocaust survivors, postwar Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, and a huge number of expelled *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans or German-speaking expellees) mostly from Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The vast majority of DPs left the country within two years, not least due to the repatriation efforts of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). According to Austrian figures, by August 1946, 576,000 DPs and expellees remained in the country. After the repatriation efforts by UNRRA, its successor, the International Refugee Organization, engaged in the resettlement of the remaining DPs. When repatriation and resettlement processes slowed down in 1951, almost 400,000 DPs and expellees remained in Austria. Initially, Austria wanted all the DPs to leave the country. With respect to the non-repatriable *Volksdeutsche* and considering the country's economic needs, this stance first changed in 1946, when some 80,000 people were granted citizenship. It was only in the mid-1950s that naturalization on a greater scale ensued, when expelled Germans were allowed to opt for Austrian citizenship. All other DPs had to formally apply for citizenship.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup>For critical reassessments, see Maximilian Graf and Sarah Knoll, "Das Ende eines Mythos? Österreich und die Kommunismusflüchtlinge," in *Aufnahmeland Österreich. Über den Umgang mit Massenflucht seit dem 18. Jahrhundert* eds. Bőrries Kuzmany and Rita Garstenaue (Vienna, 2017), 206–29; Maximilian Graf and Sarah Knoll, "In Transit or Asylum Seekers? Austria and the Cold War Refugees from the Communist Bloc," in *Migration in Austria*, eds. Bischof and Rupnow, 91–111. For a full review of the state of the field, see Maximilian Graf, "Austria as a Cold War Refuge: Reassessing the Historiography," *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropaforschung* 71, no. 4 (2022): 619–49.

<sup>3</sup>Maximilian Graf, "Humanitarianism with Limits: The Reception of Refugees from the Global South in Austria in the 1970s," *zeitgeschichte* 49, no. 3 (2022): 367–87; Maximilian Graf, "Beyond Victims of Communism? Austria and the Human Rights Question in the 1970s," in *The Human Rights Breakthrough of the 1970s. The European Community and International Relations*, eds. Sara Lorenzini et al. (London, 2022), 178–95.

<sup>4</sup>Sarah Knoll, "Flucht oder Migration? Polnische Flüchtlinge in Österreich 1981/82," in *Österreich – Polen. Stationen gemeinsamer Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Peter Ruggenthaler and Wanda Jarzabek (Graz, 2020), 215–30; Maximilian Graf, "Fluchtbewegungen nach Österreich im Zuge der 'polnischen Krise' 1980–1982," in *Migration. Flucht – Vertreibung – Integration*, eds. Stefan Karner and Barbara Stelzl-Marx (Graz, 2019), 123–36.

<sup>5</sup>Sarah Knoll, "Eine 'Völkerwanderung'? Die Flucht aus Rumänien und die Flüchtlingspolitik in Österreich um 1990," *Studies in Contemporary History* 19, no. 3 (2022): 511–36.

<sup>6</sup>For brief research-based overviews, see Thomas Albrich, "Asylland wider Willen: Die Problematik der Displaced Persons in Österreich 1945–1948," in *Die bevormundete Nation: Österreich und die Alliierten 1945–1949*, eds. Günter Bischof and Josef

Clearing the remaining refugee camps in Austria was facilitated greatly by the World Refugee Year of 1959/60, as portrayed by Peter Gatrell in *Free World?* Substantial international co-funding of housing programs finally ended the protracted clearance of the unsustainable camps that had already greatly damaged the perception of Austria's treatment of refugees (for example with respect to conditions in the camps and the de facto interrogation of refugees).<sup>7</sup> Tara Zahra has gone so far as to call the DPs in Austria "prisoners of the postwar."<sup>8</sup> At least 350,000 DPs and expellees remained in Austria permanently, representing 5 percent of the total population at the time (figures from the year 1961). The overwhelming majority were granted Austrian citizenship. They integrated into the Austrian workforce, contributed their share to the reconstruction of the country, and participated in the ensuing "economic miracle." One can hardly imagine a better starting point for the history of a country of immigration. Despite this, research efforts have remained surprisingly limited and selective—and the history of the long-term integration of expellees and DPs into Austrian society has yet to be sufficiently integrated into general narratives of Austria's postwar history.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the Austrian handling of the two major European Cold War refugee movements in 1956 and 1968 is comparatively well researched and remembered positively.

At the time of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Austrian government had responsibility for 114,000 postwar refugees, 20,000 of whom lived in state-run camps.<sup>10</sup> Against this backdrop, the Austrian state met the continuous influx of people fleeing communist rule from 1945 on with a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, the country embraced the developing Western definition of the political refugee as an escapee from communist rule; on the other hand, by the mid-1950s, the flaws in Austrian interpretation had become obvious. The Tito-Stalin split of 1948 and the subsequent rapprochement between Austria and Yugoslavia in the first half of the 1950s led to changes in the Austrian practice of dealing with Yugoslav refugees. Many refugees were regarded as economic migrants and denied asylum.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, some in the West had doubts about the future course of Austrian refugee politics.<sup>12</sup> When Hungarian refugees began arriving in Austria during the period of liberalization prior to the 1956 revolution, the authorities showed a similar response. It was only the Soviet crackdown on the Hungarian Revolution in October and November that led to a sea change in Austria's asylum policies and became central to shaping the country's image as an especially welcoming refuge.<sup>13</sup>

Initially, the Austrian government expected a maximum of 20,000 people; however, the challenge was greater than anticipated. Until early 1957, up to 180,000 Hungarians fled to Austria, all of them granted political asylum. Politicians were aware of the implications for shaping Austria's image in the world, namely, that it would be recognized as a reliable Western nation despite being a Cold War neutral. In early November 1956, when the USSR ruthlessly suppressed the uprising, Austria was confronted with the arrival of thousands of refugees per day. Given that Eastern

Leidenfrost (Innsbruck, 1988), 217–44; Gabriela Stieber, "Die Lösung des Flüchtlingsproblems 1945–1960," in *Österreich in den Fünfzigern*, eds. Thomas Albrich et al. (Innsbruck, 1995), 67–93.

<sup>7</sup>Peter Gatrell, *Free World? The Campaign to save the World's Refugees 1956–1963* (Cambridge, 2011), 109–10, 214–15.

<sup>8</sup>Tara Zahra, "Prisoners of the Postwar: Expellees, Displaced Persons, and Jews in Austria after World War II," *Austrian History Yearbook* 41 (2010): 191–215.

<sup>9</sup>For a recent assessment, see Philipp Strobl and Nikolaus Hagen, "New Perspectives on Displaced Persons (DPs) in Austria," *zeitgeschichte* 47, no. 2 (2020): 165–80.

<sup>10</sup>Friedrich Kern, *Österreich: Offene Grenze der Menschlichkeit. Die Bewältigung des ungarischen Flüchtlingsproblems im Geiste internationaler Solidarität* (Vienna, 1959), 26–27.

<sup>11</sup>Francesca Rolandi, "Escaping Yugoslavia: Italian and Austrian Refugee Policy toward Yugoslav Asylum Seekers after World War II," in *The Alps-Adriatic Region 1945–1955. International and Transnational Perspectives on a Conflicted European Region*, eds. Wolfgang Mueller et al. (Vienna, 2018), 85–109; Maximilian Graf, "Upside-down: Bilateral and transnational relations between Austria and Yugoslavia before and after 1948," in *The Tito-Stalin split 1948. 70 Years After*, eds. Tvrtko Jakovina and Martin Previšić (Zagreb, 2020), 197–206.

<sup>12</sup>Lukas Schemper, "Der Hohe Flüchtlingskommissar der Vereinten Nationen, Österreich und die Repatriierung sowjetischer Flüchtlinge," in *Österreich im Kalten Krieg. Neue Forschungen im internationalen Kontext*, eds. Maximilian Graf and Agnes Meisinger (Göttingen, 2016), 49–71.

<sup>13</sup>Patrik-Paul Volf, "Der politische Flüchtling als Symbol der Zweiten Republik: Zur Asyl- und Flüchtlingspolitik seit 1945," *zeitgeschichte* 22, no. 11/12 (1995): 415–36.

Austria itself had only emerged from a decade of Soviet occupation in 1955, the protagonists of the rebellion and the initial masses of refugees were warmly welcomed by the Austrian population as heroic “freedom fighters.” They were offered help by Austrian civil society, the Red Cross, and the Austrian Army.

Yet Austria was caught unprepared for such large numbers of refugees and quickly ran out of space to house them. They were sheltered in dilapidated buildings in Eastern Austria that had been turned into makeshift camps with deplorable living conditions.<sup>14</sup> However, the Western cooperative effort to absorb refugees passed its first major test. Due to anti-communist solidarity but also because of the increasing Western demand for skilled labor, the international community was very receptive of Hungarian refugees. Most of them found new homes in the United States and Canada. In Europe, Great Britain, West Germany, and Switzerland also offered them new homes. Between November 1956 and January 1957, some 153,000 refugees left Austria; only 25,000 to 30,000 stayed. This number probably reflects the refugees of 1956 and those Hungarians who came before them. A total of 11,800 returned to their homeland.<sup>15</sup> Still, resettlement in the West and integration in Austria did not take place overnight. When the quotas in the receiving Western countries had been filled, Austrian attitudes changed immediately. Facing the fact that several thousand Hungarians would remain in Austria permanently, the initial welcome fueled by anti-communist sentiment quickly wore out and by the end of the year had already started to turn into the opposite. In early 1957, the Austrian government began to argue that the refugees had “responsibilities.” Media reports and public opinion turned hostile. Hungarian refugees were soon denounced as “ungrateful” and “parasitical.” Austrians’ initial willingness to be helpful quickly subsided as these “victims of communism” began to compete for jobs and accommodation.<sup>16</sup> One can assume a connection between this frustration and the protracted integration of DPs and expellees as well as the (in comparison to Western European countries) delayed take-off of Austria’s postwar “economic miracle.”

The next major wave of refugees followed the crushing of the “Prague Spring” in August 1968. Between August and late October, some 162,000 refugees came to Austria. A second influx of refugees from Czechoslovakia followed in the spring and summer of 1969, when “normalization” in Czechoslovakia intensified and the last reformers lost their positions. It was only when the borders were finally closed in October 1969 that this renewed exodus stopped. Again, the Austrian government called upon the international community for support, but the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was only able to help people recognized as refugees under the Geneva Convention. Only a small number of refugees qualified for this status. In total, a mere 12,000 Czechs and Slovaks applied for political asylum in Austria, and it is estimated that only 2,000 to 3,000 remained in Austria permanently. For most refugees, Austria only served as a temporary haven—not least because they easily found other countries in need of their skilled labor. The Austrian media labeled them “transients,” and hence the population responded less critically than vis-à-vis the Hungarian refugees in 1956/57. However, assurances of solidarity were permanently accompanied by public debates about the financial burdens resulting from sheltering Czechoslovak citizens.<sup>17</sup>

The most important example of Austria as a transit zone for refugees is the case of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union via Austria commencing in the mid-1960s. Until the end of the Cold War, more than 250,000 people migrated through Austria (mostly on the way to Israel and the USA). Still, as

<sup>14</sup>See the chapters by Ferenc Cseresnyés, Edda Engelke, Peter Eppel, András Lénárt, Ibolya Murber, and Kornél Ziperovszky in *Die ungarische Revolution und Österreich 1956*, eds. Ibolya Murber and Zoltán Fónagy (Vienna, 2006). Also, see Andreas Gémes: *Austria and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution: Between Solidarity and Neutrality* (Pisa, 2008); for a concise and recent summary, see Ibolya Murber, “Betreuung und Integration von Ungarnflüchtlingen in Österreich 1956/57,” in *Migration. Flucht – Vertreibung – Integration*, eds. Stefan Karner and Barbara Stelzl-Marx (Graz, 2019), 103–20.

<sup>15</sup>Sarah Knoll, “Calling for Support: International Aid for Refugees in Austria during the Cold War,” *zeitgeschichte* 48, no. 3 (2021): 395–99.

<sup>16</sup>Brigitta Zierer, “Willkommen Ungarnflüchtlinge 1956?,” in *Asylland wider Willen: Flüchtlinge in Österreich im europäischen Kontext seit 1914*, eds. Gernot Heiss and Oliver Rathkolb (Vienna, 1995), 157–71.

<sup>17</sup>Silke Stern, “Die tschechoslowakische Emigration: Österreich als Erstaufnahme- und Asylland,” in *Prager Frühling: Das internationale Krisenjahr 1968*, eds. Stefan Karner et al. (Vienna, 2008), 1025–43.

many as seven or eight thousand stayed in Austria.<sup>18</sup> Until the economic crises of the 1970s, Western societies were in search of skilled labor and quickly absorbed refugees from Eastern Europe. They were a welcome addition to active and formalized large-scale labor recruitment by Western European states (most notably West Germany) in the years of permanent economic growth. The Austrian practice of labor recruitment since the 1960s, its sudden end in 1973, and the country's treatment of "guest workers" stresses the interconnectedness of the country's migration history.

### Labor Recruitment, "Guest Workers," and the Polish Crisis

Once the remaining postwar DPs and expellees were absorbed as a workforce by the job market, labor recruitment started: after a national compromise securing the additional workforce needed for the economy and preserving the privileged access of Austrian nationals to the domestic labor market, agreements with Spain (1962), Turkey (1964), and Yugoslavia (1966) were concluded. The latter arrangement is particularly telling, since it regularized a migratory drive that had been in place since the early postwar period. Within a few years, it resulted in a rapidly growing number of "guest workers" from Yugoslavia. Intended to serve the temporary needs of the Austrian economy, in the long-term the people who came to Austria on the basis of these agreements made up the most substantial share of immigration to Austria since the immediate postwar years.<sup>19</sup> Just how unintended this result was is best reflected in contemporaneous statements by Austrian politicians. In 1965, in a conversation with his Bulgarian counterpart Ivan Bashev, foreign minister Bruno Kreisky stated that "Austria does not want to become an immigration country. It is too small for that."<sup>20</sup> Statements like this became a mantra of Austrian politicians throughout the Cold War even though the reality clearly showed that the opposite was the case.

The first peak of foreign labor in Austria was reached in 1973, with 230,000 foreign workers representing almost 9 percent of the total workforce. Approximately two-thirds of guest workers came from Yugoslavia. The "oil shock" resulted in a recruitment stop and the freezing of the number of foreign workers at the 1973 level. Furthermore, a new Foreign Nationals Employment Law came into force in 1976, which, among other things, strengthened the primacy of nationals on the Austrian job market. While a quarter of the foreign workforce lost their residence and work permits, this did not reduce the number of foreigners in Austria in the long term—not least due to family reunifications. Subsequently, these people also gradually entered the Austrian workforce. During the 1970s economic crises, usually symbolized by the two oil shocks, the Austrian discourse about the foreign workforce changed and additional foreign workers were rejected. Although xenophobic tendencies in sections of Austrian society were nothing new, the first signs they were on the rise became visible, and the government aimed to counteract them by reference to the country's multinational legacies originating in the Habsburg Empire. The aggravated economic situation after the second oil shock in 1979 meant the end of full employment and further reduced the acceptance of foreign competitors on the job market. Parallel to this, internal and public debates about growing numbers of asylum seekers from Eastern Europe began to surface.

After the postwar DPs, it was labor migration to Austria and not refugee movements that had the most resounding impact on Austria's migration history and in consequence—at least ostensibly—shaped Austrian policies toward foreigners and refugees. Until the emergence of *Solidarność* and the growing crisis in 1981, Poland was portrayed as a role model of liberalism in the Warsaw Pact and certainly not as a country from which to flee. In 1972, a treaty was even agreed to concerning

<sup>18</sup>Recently, see Wolfgang Mueller, Hannes Leidinger, and Viktor Ishchenko, "'When Israel Was in Egypt's Land.' Jewish Emigration from the USSR, 1968–1991," *zeitgeschichte* 49, no. 3 (2022), 343–65.

<sup>19</sup>On this and the next paragraph, see Hakan Gürses et al., eds., *Gastarbeiter: 40 Jahre Arbeitsmigration* (Vienna, 2004); Vida Bakondy, ed., *Viel Glück! Migration heute. Wien, Belgrad, Zagreb, Istanbul* (Vienna, 2010); Vladimir Ivanović, "Die Beschäftigung jugoslawischer Arbeitskräfte in Österreich in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren," *zeitgeschichte* 40, no. 1 (2013): 35–48; Verena Lorber, *Angeworben: GastarbeiterInnen in Österreich in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren* (Göttingen, 2016).

<sup>20</sup>Memcon Kreisky – Bashev, 22.7.1965, Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (ÖStA)/Archiv der Republik (AdR), Bundesministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten (BMAA)/II-Pol, Bulgarien 2, GZ. 131.851-6/65, Zl. 139.853-6/65.

the abolition of mutual visa requirements. Similar agreements were signed with Romania and Bulgaria as early as the second half of the 1960s, but were out of reach with neighboring Czechoslovakia and were delayed until 1979 with Hungary. However, those treaties meant little to nothing for citizens of regimes with a restrictive passport policy.<sup>21</sup> Poland's pursuit of a more liberal policy was a different case. Poles traveled to Austria and some of them also picked up work. Despite the 1976 Foreign Nationals Employment Law, Austrian officials had turned a blind eye to this movement.<sup>22</sup>

This changed when *Solidarność* pushed the Polish government close to collapse in 1981. Ultimately, the regime only survived as a result of the imposition of martial law on 13 December 1981. Throughout 1981, a movement that initially constituted labor migration to Austria turned into a refugee movement amidst the deteriorating political situation in Poland.<sup>23</sup> The desperate state of the Polish economy pushed many Polish citizens to move to Austria or transit through the country, even though they had not (yet) been politically persecuted. Their arrival in Austria was made possible by the 1972 agreement allowing travel without visas. Polish refugees could therefore travel to Austria legally without a visa as tourists and then apply for political asylum. By the end of 1981, their number exceeded 30,000. In addition, several thousand "unrecorded tourists" from Poland lived in Austria. Only 10 percent of those refugees applying for asylum were granted such status according to the Geneva Convention. The rest only received permission to stay. The extent of the financial burden led the Austrian government to call for aid from the international community, but the response was minimal. Economic crises and détente had changed the Western and Austrian attitude to granting political asylum to Eastern Europeans; the Poles who had come to Austria were perceived as "migrant laborers" by both the international community and domestic politics. Interestingly, the Polish regime also thought that way; visiting Vienna in November 1981, foreign minister Józef Czyrek proposed regulating Polish labor migration to Austria via a treaty and stated that granting political asylum to those economic migrants would be a remnant of the Cold War. Against the backdrop of the end of full employment in Austria, no foreigners potentially seeking work were welcome and thus the Polish proposal stood no chance of being considered at all. Many Austrians rejected the Polish asylum seekers, and the Austrian tabloid press fueled this sentiment. The government experienced growing domestic pressure and it reacted by suspending the agreement on visa-free travel only days before the imposition of martial law. Austria had thus effectively stopped the influx of refugees.<sup>24</sup>

The Polish regime imposed martial law on 13 December. In the morning of that day, Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky announced on National Radio: "We always have accepted political refugees . . . and have viewed refugees generously. We are against economic refugees because we simply cannot support them."<sup>25</sup> Now that there was no doubt any longer that this group qualified for political refugee status, the UNHCR became active and the first agreements to take refugees from third party states followed. Over Christmas, a wave of solidarity swept through the country and private donations increased by leaps and bounds. But this did not last long, and only a little later Austrian public opinion and the media voiced their discontent. Some letters to Chancellor Kreisky expressed a dislike for the refugees in no uncertain terms and demanded they be sent back home. The worst tensions in the refugee situation in Austria had subsided by June 1982 because of both the reinstatement of visa requirements (preventing further masses traveling to Austria) and a rise in international aid, including the acceptance of Polish refugees from Austria. As in 1956 and 1968, Austria only wanted to serve as a port of transit

<sup>21</sup>Maximilian Graf, "The Opening of the Austrian-Hungarian Border Revisited: How European Détente Contributed to Overcoming the 'Iron Curtain,'" in *New Perspectives on the End of the Cold War. Unexpected Transformations?* eds. Bernhard Blumenau et al. (London, 2018), 138–58. The author intends to publish a comparative critical reassessment of the Western Cold War demand for greater "freedom of movement" and corresponding visa policies by considering the example of Austria and Eastern Europe.

<sup>22</sup>Eduard Stanek, *Verfolgt Verjagt Vertrieben. Flüchtlinge in Österreich von 1945–1984* (Vienna, 1985), 146–47.

<sup>23</sup>On Austria and the Polish crisis, see Maximilian Graf, "Österreich und die 'polnische Krise' im Kontext 1980–1983," in *Österreich – Polen. Stationen gemeinsamer Geschichte im 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Peter Ruggenthaler and Wanda Jarząbek (Graz, 2020), 201–21.

<sup>24</sup>Graf, "Fluchtbewegungen nach Österreich im Zuge der 'polnischen Krise' 1980–1982," 127–30.

<sup>25</sup>Transcript in "Information für den Herrn Bundesminister," ÖStA/AdR, BMAA/II-Pol, GZ. 166.03.00/355-II.3/81.

for the refugees. What was different in the Polish crisis was the negativity of the refugee discourse from the very outset.<sup>26</sup>

Within the discourse about economic crises and their repercussions on the job market, public and political debates about refugees turned negative and in further consequence affected decisions whether to grant or deny political asylum. Acceptance rates declined sharply from 1983 onward. Thereafter, Austrian chancellors received monthly briefings on the exact development of the number of asylum seekers. In 1988, the Austrian government produced an information leaflet aimed at potential asylum seekers persuading them to reconsider their decision to emigrate, warning that they had barely any chance of being granted political asylum. As a result, there would be no chance for them to find work. Additionally, aiming at those who intended to migrate further, the leaflet stressed that there were barely any immigration quotas available and that seeking asylum in Austria would prevent the acceptance of a future claim in a third country.<sup>27</sup>

### The End of the Cold War and the Early 1990s

The best-known refugee phenomenon reaching Austria in 1989 was the movement of East Germans transiting via Hungary and Austria to West Germany. As transients caused no costs for Austria, they received a warm and supportive welcome during their short stay. When refugees from Romania started arriving in Austria, the reaction was similar to what happened in 1981 or even worse. The Austrian media intensified their critical discussion of the “migration crisis,” rejecting additional refugees. Romania’s bloody revolution in December 1989 shocked Austrians and produced an abundance of donations for the stricken country. They showed little empathy, however, with those refugees who came to Austria and applied for political asylum as more than 12,000 Romanians did in the first months of 1990. Romanian refugees were suspected of being “agents” of the Securitate, criminals, or, even worse, “potential sexual predators,” constituting “security risks” for the country. These debates spilled out into the streets on the local level in February and March. As a consequence, on 15 March 1990, Austria began to demand visas from Romanian citizens wanting to enter the country. This quickly reduced the number of refugees entering the country.<sup>28</sup> A similar step followed with Poland later that year, and the monitoring and securing of the border with Hungary soon involved the assistance of the Austrian armed forces. Initially planned as a short-term measure, it lasted until 2011 and was de facto reimplemented in 2015. The reimposition of control over mobility across borders that had been promised greater “freedom of movement” during the Cold War symbolized Austria’s attitude toward potential migration from Eastern Europe post-1989. In a conversation with Mikhail Gorbachev in September 1991, Austrian chancellor Franz Vranitzky stated: “By and large, only Europeans settle in Austria. Migration triggers resistance from the established population when it exceeds a certain percentage.” Warningly, he pointed out “that migration breeds right-wing radicalism.”<sup>29</sup>

The early 1990s brought a new asylum law implementing, among other things, today’s practice of safe third countries as well as changes in the laws on residence rights. In consequence, the number of asylum seekers decreased. However, with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the next major influx of refugees was just around the corner. In accordance with the new asylum law, refugees from former Yugoslavia were treated as “de facto refugees” (since they had transited at least Slovenia) and were granted temporary permission to stay and soon also to work in Austria by 1992/93. In contrast to the restrictive debates during the years of “migration crisis,” this was a pragmatic and liberal response to the arrival of more than 100,000 refugees from the war-torn former Yugoslav republics.<sup>30</sup> Many of

<sup>26</sup>Graf, “Fluchtbewegungen nach Österreich im Zuge der ‘polnischen Krise’ 1980–1982,” 131–36.

<sup>27</sup>A more detailed analysis of this development will be published by Maximilian Graf, “From Refugees to Labor Migrants: Cold War Austria in the Central European Context,” in *Unlikely Refuge* (working title), ed. Michal Frankl (forthcoming 2025). For further details, see <https://www.unlikely-refuge.eu/>.

<sup>28</sup>Knoll, “Eine ‘Völkerwanderung?’” 511–36.

<sup>29</sup>Memcon. Vranitzky – Gorbatschow, 30.9.1991, ÖStA/AdR, BMAA/II-Pol, GZ. 518.01.225/14-II.3/91.

<sup>30</sup>On the government’s position as portrayed by the Minister of the Interior, see Franz Löschnak, *Menschen aus der Fremde: Flüchtlinge, Vertriebene, Gastarbeiter* (Vienna, 1993). For a critical study, see Barbara Franz, *Uprooted and Unwanted: Bosnian Refugees in Austria and the United States* (College Station, 2005).

the 95,000 refugees from Bosnia stayed permanently in Austria. Initial historical studies have confirmed the contemporaneous assumption that there was a strong connection between labor migration, family reunifications, and the later reception of refugees. The arriving refugees could build upon pre-existing networks that facilitated integration and relieved the state.<sup>31</sup>

In the early 1990s, not least due to economic needs, the foreign workforce in Austria was on the rise again, reaching 260,000. Partially, this number also includes the legalization of irregular or informal labor migration since the late 1980s. In those years, the number of foreigners living in Austria doubled to more than 700,000. Against this backdrop, the Austrian discourse was shaped by growing xenophobia (promoted by the rising political right) and counter-initiatives such as the *Lichtermeer* (sea of lights).<sup>32</sup> Austria's attitude toward migration from Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War constitutes no exception to international trends of the time. Regarding migration from Eastern Europe, there are continuities to the European Union's (EU) eastern enlargement in 2004 and 2007. Even though the 2004 enlargement further added to Austria's already remarkable "membership dividend," the country made full use of the seven-year transitional period until it opened its labor market to citizens of the new member states in 2011.<sup>33</sup> While labor migration within the EU has become normal, other migration patterns and the arrival of refugees from non-European countries have shaped the discourse on migration ever since.

## Conclusion

Throughout the Cold War and beyond, Austria always stressed its humanitarian position. However, readiness to accept refugees always depended on the labor market and thus had a strong utilitarian dimension—from the end of World War II all the way into the twenty-first century. In the early postwar period, the government of the re-established war-torn country initially wanted all DPs and expellees to vacate Austrian territory. Yet, in the long term, 350,000 of them (a clear majority of them being German speaking expellees) stayed and became an integral part of Austrian society and the workforce. While reluctantly mastering this challenge, starting in 1956, the young neutral country established itself as a place of first asylum for escapees and refugees from Eastern Europe in the Cold War.

While stressing its humanitarian merits, Austria always aimed at being a port of transit only and politicians from all sides adhered to the mantra that Austria was not a country of immigration. Due to this and the protracted integration of postwar refugees, Austria was a latecomer to the active recruitment of foreign labor (in comparison with Germany). When the need for guest workers declined after the first oil shock, the government sought to reduce their numbers. The Austrian attitude toward the previously desperately needed foreigners (and their reuniting families) who had contributed a lot to the economic development of the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s only worsened. This change hardened after the second oil shock and also applied to the next major influx of refugees from Eastern Europe during the Polish crisis of the early 1980s. Preventing migration from Eastern and Southeastern Europe was the order of the day when the Cold War ended and was enshrined in new laws regarding asylum and residency rights. Despite this, the country significantly contributed to the international efforts to master the refugee movements during the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the first half of the 1990s. Again, the interconnectedness of Eastern and Southeastern European migrations to Austria became visible as the established and to some degree already naturalized community of former guest workers significantly facilitated the government's tasks in mastering this first post-Cold War

<sup>31</sup>Hasan Softić, "Arbeit – Neubeginn – Flucht. Die Entstehung der bosnischen Community in Enns," in *Aufnahmeland Österreich. Über den Umgang mit Massenflucht seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*, eds. Börries Kuzmany and Rita Garstenauer (Vienna, 2017), 230–52.

<sup>32</sup>For a more detailed summary, see Andreas Weigl, *Migration und Integration. Eine widersprüchliche Geschichte* (Innsbruck, 2009), 43–47, 67–68, 83–85.

<sup>33</sup>Maximilian Graf, "The Accession of the Neutrals: (Re)assessing the First Post-Cold War Enlargement of the EU," in *European Integration and the Global Financial Crisis. Looking Back on the Maastricht Years, 1980s–1990s*, eds. Michele Di Donato and Silvio Pons (Cham, 2023), 91–111.



refugee challenge. This article proposes an interconnected understanding of Austria's migration history and calls for integrated research efforts (going beyond certain refugee moments and specific aspects of labor migration) that will contribute to a better understanding of Austria's history as a country of immigration since the end of World War II.

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