



# The evolution and sustainability of seasonal migration from Poland to Germany: From the dusk of the 19th century to the dawn of the 21st century

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## ABSTRACT

We document and suggest a rationale for the durability of seasonal migration from Poland to Germany, a phenomenon persisting for more than a century. We refer to the role of the *tradition* of engaging in seasonal migration as a force that helped invigorate the process and contribute to its sustainability even when, to different degrees and at different times, the process was interrupted by a shifting political, regulatory, and legal environment. Evidence in support of the role of tradition is provided, among other things, by the continuation of the seasonal flow of migrants from once border regions - which became internal regions following WWII - despite the fact that since the redrawing of the German-Polish border, proximity is no longer a factor encouraging repeated, short-term seasonal moves.

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## 1. Introduction

Seasonal migration of Poles for work in German agriculture became a mass phenomenon by the end of the 19th century, and has continued to be an important component of Polish labor migration well into the early 21st century. In spite of its remarkable durability, this form of migration has usually been looked at over fairly narrow time periods. In this paper, we look at seasonal migration from Poland to Germany over the long run, and we seek to unravel what sustained this form of migration for so long. In this vein, we maintain that current-day seasonal migration from Poland to Germany has its roots in the distant past.

We allude to the role of a *tradition* of engagement in seasonal migration. We show how this factor helps explain the long-term durability of seasonal migration from Poland to Germany, over and beyond economic considerations. Evidence in support of the role of tradition is provided, among other things, by the continuation of the seasonal flow of migrants from once border regions - which became internal regions following WWII - despite the fact that since the redrawing of the German-Polish border, proximity is no longer a factor encouraging repeated, short-term seasonal moves.

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By *tradition* we mean a tendency to act in a particular manner over a long period of time and across generations. When that which conferred an economic benefit in the past is increasingly emulated, a tradition is created. Acting in accordance with tradition side-steps frequent re-assessments and evaluations; people act “traditionally” because their predecessors did. When tradition takes a strong hold, it is only slightly vulnerable, if not immune altogether, to events and interruptions that interfere with people acting in concert with tradition. For example, an intergenerational lull can quickly be reversed. In as much as migration becomes a way of life for individuals and communities, the term tradition, as used in this paper, is akin to the concept of “culture.”

Although in some sense networks can be perceived as a manifestation of tradition, we do not equate tradition with networks because each can impact on migration processes and outcomes differently. Whereas networks can act as purveyors of tradition, they can evolve for reasons that have nothing to do with tradition (Stark and Jakubek, 2013). Conversely, tradition can maintain the tendency to resort to and restore migration even in the absence of networks. In one particular context, as we show below, a combination of tradition and networks was more powerful in shaping migration flows than administrative interference. In another context we note that networks could help reinvigorate migration because they were premised on tradition, and that when tradition could be expressed, network-type links were poised to play a role in churning migration.

The inclination to go back in time in search of an explanation for the current process of seasonal migration was motivated, in part, by recent studies of contemporary seasonal migration (Kaczmarczyk and Łukowski, 2004; Stark and Fan, 2007; Kępińska, 2008). These studies prompted us to look at a persistent seasonal migration flow through the lens of the mechanisms that added sustainability to it and helped to sustain it even when it was interrupted, in different ways and at different times, by substantial changes in the economic, political, regulatory, and legal environment. (These interruptions included two World Wars and a multiple reshuffling of borders in the first half of the 20th century).

Before turning to detailed reasoning, a word of caution is in order. The current paper is exploratory in nature, and tentative in its conclusions. We are aware of the need to sift harder through archives, primary data sources, statistical yearbooks, newspapers of the time, memoirs, and the like. We are also aware of the benefits to be conferred by looking further at regional characteristics (ranging from population densities to agrarian structures) at the end of the 19th century as possible additional contributing factors affecting the participation of some regions but not of others in seasonal migration. Nonetheless, we are of the opinion that the novel contributing factor that we have identified is sufficiently powerful to merit us presenting it, and enticing enough to inspire and trigger follow up research.

As we go back in time studying migration from Poland to Germany, we are reminded that Poland did not exist in the 19th century or well into the 20th century, that is, not until 1918. As a result of three partitions (1772, 1793, 1795), the territory of Poland (the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) was divided between the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, and Habsburg Austria. Thus, when we refer to migration from Poland prior to 1918, we have in mind the Russian partition (the Kingdom of Poland in 1815–1914), and the Austrian partition. In other words, we refer to seasonal migration that took place across state borders, and we do not delve into seasonal forays of Polish workers to Prussian and German agriculture within Germany.

In the next three sections we allude to the persistence of the seasonal migration outflow over time and (across shifting) space. In Section 2, we study the onset and the build up of the tradition of seasonal migration from Poland to Germany, concentrating on the period up to WWII. In Section 3, we consider the WWII era and its immediate aftermath. In Section 4, we study the recent past. Final thoughts are presented in the [Concluding reflections](#) section.

## 2. The onset and the building up of a tradition: a brief overview of seasonal migration from Poland to Germany before WWII

### 2.1. Seasonal migration from Poland to Germany at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries

A convenient starting point for studying substantial seasonal migration from Poland to Germany over the long stretch of time is 1885. In that year, approximately 30,000 Poles who were subjects of Russian Poland (the Polish Kingdom) or of Austrian Poland (Galicia), but who in a good many cases were long-term residents of Prussia, were deported from Prussia (Wajda, 1976; Łuczak, 1988; Olsson, 1996). The reason for the expulsions (though not of Poles from Prussian Poland who were German subjects) was the German authorities' fear that the mass inflow of Polish labor migrants to the eastern provinces of Germany could harm the Germanization process in the area.

At the same time, due to a significant loss of population in the East and the consequent shortage of manual workers, the eastern provinces of Germany experienced a growing demand for foreign workers. The population loss was caused by two factors: overseas migration to the U.S., which began in the late 1860s, and internal migration to the industrial centers of the western provinces that started to replace overseas migration in the 1880s. The shortage was exacerbated by the intensification of German agriculture. By the end of the 19th century, with the introduction of new crops, in particular sugar beets (a very labor intensive crop), and the adoption of new technologies, farmers needed many workers during the summer but just a few during the winter. Before, workers were needed much more evenly throughout the year. These factors combined to create a growing demand for a foreign seasonal workforce (Bade, 1980; Olsson, 1996).

In the wake of the deportations and as a consequence of politically-motivated decisions, until 1890 the borders of Germany were effectively closed to Polish workers from Russian Poland and Austrian Poland. Neither the deportations nor the closure of the borders could, however, suppress the demand for seasonal work or the willingness to supply it. Even when political voices are loud, economic needs often speak louder. In 1890, in response to protests by German landowners, the borders were re-opened to Polish workers, although in order “to satisfy the economic interests without jeopardizing security policy considerations” (Bade, 2003: 157), and to prevent settlement, workers were ordered to return home for the winter season, a system of mandatory registration was enacted, and

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