

Emigration (Portugal)

By [Yvette Santos](#)

This article analyzes the characteristics of Portuguese emigration to France and England during the First World War, which was provoked by the reduction of Portuguese emigration to traditional countries of settlement (Latin America) and Portugal's entry into the war. Specifically, it analyzes the position of the Portuguese state until 1919.

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Portuguese Emigration and State Position before 1916

The employment of Portuguese workers in [France](#) and [England](#) during the Great War provided the [Portuguese state](#) with a new function. From this moment on, the state became responsible for the legal framework that regulated the exit of workers, acting in collaboration with allied countries and negotiating with them, from October 1916 onwards, the conditions of workers' employment. Traditional emigration intermediaries were not part of this negotiation. As Jorge Fernandes Alves argues, this was the first concerted instance of Portuguese emigration to European countries as departure to traditional immigration countries was impossible.^[1]

Until then, the state's regulation was based on the protection of the migrant, respecting the individual right to emigrate and repressing illegal immigration.^[2] In this context, it was up to the private sphere (ticket and passport agents and emigration agents) to organize the emigration process with the local authorities who were responsible for issuing passports. However, in 1915, the progressive prohibition of immigrants' entry in transatlantic countries ([Brazil](#), [USA](#), [Argentina](#)) led the Portuguese government to look for alternative countries in which to place their labor force.

In most cases, these efforts were unsuccessful, not only due to barriers established by destination countries (England, for instance) to the entry of unqualified labor but also due to the incapacity, or even refusal, of the Portuguese government to ensure a legal framework for the hiring of workers when requested by the destination country (such as in the case of the French protectorate of Morocco).^[3] In 1915 and especially in the beginning of 1916, French authorities, with the support of the Portuguese Ambassador, João Pinheiro Chagas (1863-1925), sought to approach the Portuguese authorities in order to organize legal hiring of workers for agriculture and industry. Even so, it was necessary to wait for [Portugal's](#) entry into the war for the agreement to be signed. Until then, emigration to France was illegal and facilitated by the recruitment of seasonal workers to work in agriculture by French agents based in [Spain](#).

Agreement Conditions and Recruitment of Workers

Portugal's entry into the conflict on 15 March 1916 was a time of rupture. In February, a number of measures were taken to strengthen the control of exits of young men old enough for military service and to increase penalties for deserters, refractors and intermediaries. Still, a degree of flexibility remained regarding the exit of seasonal migrants.^[4]

Besides meeting the imperatives of war and the need to cooperate with allied countries, negotiations with France were a response to the lack of available work and the increasing [social tension](#) in Portugal. Five key issues emerged from the negotiations concluded on 28 October 1916:^[5]

1. Simplification of exit conditions by establishing an effective system of recruitment of workers, with close collaboration between the French and the Portuguese authorities, which allowed for a quick arrival in France;
2. Establishment of a legal recruitment age of thirty-two years old, with the aim of restricting the exit of young people of military age. However, young men on military leave could exit, as long as they responded to military recruitment efforts, if necessary;
3. Recruitment was authorized in the areas of Lisbon and Oporto, though only in civilian establishments and only when it did not imply desertion. The recruitment from areas outside these two cities were considered a priority;
4. The Directorate-General of Labour from the Ministry of Labour had the responsibility to define and negotiate work contracts with foreign delegations. The Interior Ministry was responsible for establishing the conditions for the issue of a free collective passport, through municipal governors and town administrators, and also providing the necessary support for the fast completion of the hiring process. The interference of ticket and passport agents and of the emigration agents in the organization of the administrative process was thus prohibited. These intermediaries were replaced by French agents with a broad intervention power, therefore limiting the role of government to the acknowledgment of the selected workers' list (by the Ministry of Labour and by the Ministry of War) and to police assistance (Ministry of Interior) and shifting the state's control to a local scale (municipal governors);
5. The employment contract, six months with the possibility for extension, should specify the transport and housing conditions, as well as the working conditions (accommodation, salary, job type, and skills required) that the [French government](#) would allow; on the other hand, workers, supervised by foremen, should in turn respect the military or civilian regulation of their workplace;
6. Sending a Portuguese delegate to France, who would act as an intermediary and workers' representative, in order to receive and resolve any complaint that might occur during a worker's stay.

Given the urgent need for manual labor, the hiring and departure of workers was organized very swiftly and the first contingent arrived in France in early November 1916. On 4 November, the Portuguese consul registered the presence of 7,523 Portuguese workers with military leave in a Bayonne warehouse. In 1917, French work requests became increasingly more frequent and demanding of more skilled and specialized workers. The French Ministries of Armaments and War even requested workers that had already training in military units who were skilled and disciplined enough to work in military factory units.

Although the same conditions of employment regarding workers' recruitment were given to England, nevertheless it was by unofficial means, without any legal basis and with the intervention of ticket and passport agencies, that emigration to England was organized. In particular, with the intervention of the Kendall, Pinto Basto and the Port Co Ltd Companies, located in Oporto, in March 1917 that the exit of workers to England truly began to be hired as loggers or as construction and maintenance workers in the railways. Without any formal agreement, the English authorities were free to organize recruitment according to their own criteria, therefore weakening both Portuguese interests and the protection of workers abroad.

Worker Complaints and State Actions

Although the military regulations that governed labor camps and factories were intended to prevent any dispute (namely obedience to superior orders and banning the right to strike), difficult relations within the workplace hierarchy, discontent with wages as compared to those earned by other foreigners, food quality and poor housing conditions increased the complaints made by Portuguese workers.

Until the end of the conflict, these complaints, in conjunction with national pressures that combined elite dissatisfaction, mainly

in the agricultural sector, and workers' claims for greater emigration opportunities, led the government to restrict recruitment in six districts (Bragança, Braga, Porto, Aveiro, Viseu and Lisbon) in October 1917. In September that same year, an official recruitment agreement was arranged with England. However, this did not establish selection and recruitment conditions in Portugal, which was not on the agenda for the negotiations. Instead, the negotiations focused on the need to change the duration of the employment contract so that workers could stay in England until the end of the conflict, to increase their salary to that received by other foreigners, to improve health care and to determine the conditions of repatriation.

Despite the negotiations, the Council of Ministers decided to suspend all exits regardless of the destination on 1 November 1917. The politician and later President of Portugal, [Sidónio Pais \(1872-1918\)](#) was a proponent of this position, which hampered relations with the Allies who sought to pressure Portugal in the opposite direction. The English in particular sought to sway Portugal's decision by dismissing the Portuguese delegate between December 1917 and 14 January 1918. Still, exits continued into the end of January 1918 when the decision was partially suspended with respect to Lisbon and Oporto in order to safeguard the interests of the agricultural elites.

Workers' complaints increased, particularly in England, from late 1917 until mid-1918. Some strikes took place (the delegate of the Portuguese Legation in London registers a strike of about 100 workers in April 1918) and some workers escaped from the labor camps (forty-nine escaped also in April 1918). After being put on trial for disobedience by a military court, most of the escapees were sentenced to [forced labor](#). The complexity of the situation of Portuguese workers in England led to the renegotiation of hiring conditions. The agreement, concluded on 14 May that year, reviewed the duration of the employment contract, the conditions under which the contract could be extended and the start date; it also established a salary increase both for regular and overtime hours, as well as the conditions for health care benefits and sick leave pay. It foresaw provisions and housing improvements while making easier the relationship between Portuguese workers and their superiors and the means of intervention at the Portuguese authorities' disposal regarding their nationals. It also stipulated the conditions for compensation in case of accident or illness, as well as the conditions for sending remittances to Portugal. Simultaneously, a delegate was appointed in May 1918 by the Directorate-General of Labour without the interference of the English authorities.

In France, few changes were made to the 1916 agreement, except the one raising the age limit for recruitment to thirty-five years old and the appointment of an assistant delegate in April 1918 to strengthen institutional support for Portuguese workers.

Conclusion

Although it is difficult to know exactly how many workers were hired during the war, Jorge Fernandes Alves estimates that 23,499 work contracts were signed during the conflict and that 16,000 went to France, a majority of whom (about 10,000) were recruited in Oporto.^[6] According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' data, 4,669 went to England, with 3,732 traveling in 1917. Statistical data from 10 October 1917 from the same source shows that significant emigration traffic came from the coastal area of Portugal but also from some districts in the interior. Most workers left the country swiftly and with ease by boat (for those who emigrated from Porto, Braga, Lisbon, Aveiro, and Viana do Castelo both to France or England) or by railway (for those who lived in Bragança, Coimbra, Vila Real, Viseu, Leiria, and Portalegre).

After the armistice, England and France adopted different positions regarding the influx of workers. On the one hand, England considered its position a response to an exceptional need during the conflict and put a stop to immigration. England organized the repatriation of a total of 2,512 Portuguese workers until April 1919. France, on the other hand, continued to receive workers after the conflict to help with the country's post-war reconstruction. However, in 1919 France suddenly decided to close its borders once it became aware of the growing influx of illegal immigrants. French authorities initiated a rapprochement with the Portuguese authorities with the goal of conducting negotiations during the [peace conference](#). No agreement was ever signed. Emigration to transatlantic countries had by then resumed and it was only in the late 1950's that France became the main destination for Portuguese immigrants.

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Notes

1. ↑ Alves, Jorge Fernandes: “Operários para França e Inglaterra (1914-1918). Experiências da emigração portuguesa intra-europeia” [Workers to France and England. Experiences of the Portuguese intra-European emigration], in: Revista da Faculdade de Letras, Historia 5 (1988), pp. 331-333.
2. ↑ Pereira, Miriam Halpern: A política portuguesa de emigração (1850 a 1930) [The Portuguese Emigration Policy (1850-1930)], Lisbon 1981.
3. ↑ Alves, Operários para França e Inglaterra 1988, p. 320.
4. ↑ Santos, Yvette: “L’État portugais face à l’émigration et aux impératifs de la Première Guerre mondiale”, in: Revue Riveneuve Continents et revue Exils et Migrations Ibériques au XXe siècle 15, Primavera 2013.
5. ↑ Alves, Operários para França e Inglaterra 1988, p. 325.
6. ↑ Ibid. p. 327.

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