

Economic Relationships between Czechoslovakia and Argentina in 1945–1955: Cooperation of the “Communist Police State” and the “Fascist Demagogue” at the Beginning of the Cold War

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse the economic relationship between Czechoslovakia and Argentina in the period 1945–1955 via archival documents. At the end of World War II Czechoslovakia was unable to recover the positions it had established in Latin America in the 1920's and 1930's. The increasing influence of Russia on Czechoslovakian foreign policy and the incipient Cold War drastically limited Czechoslovakian opportunities. In addition, the relationship with Argentina was rather specific within the region. On the one hand, the country was of key financial importance and commanded massive surpluses that were required by the Czechoslovakian economy (wool, raw leather, meat, tannin, fodder, corn, plant oils, etc.). On the other hand, there was Juan Domingo Perón's political regime whose foreign-political line was to seek ever greater autonomy from the USA. Despite the mutual antagonism between both regimes, Peronist Argentina became one of the Czechoslovakia's largest non-European markets. As a matter of fact, Czechoslovakia implemented a large number of major orders in the country, of which the distillery in San Nicolás was the most significant. At that time it was to be the largest distillery in the world.

Key words: Czechoslovakia, Argentina, economic relationships, economic history, Latin America, Cold War

Introduction

After the end of World War II, Czechoslovakia was compelled to invest massively in its political and economic revival. There was general approval in foreign-political terms that the leadership of the USSR would provide security for the republic against any future German aggression. All the same, the communists denied the need and importance of these connections, notably economic, with the western world. This policy, which was labelled a “bridge concept”, soon became problematic. The increasing interference of the Soviet Union in Czechoslovakian affairs culminated in a communist coup in February 1948. As a result, the period from the end of the 1940’s to the mid-1950’s represented the steepest decline in Czechoslovakian foreign-political activities. The removal of Vladimír Clementis, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1948–1950, and his adherents, was the clearest indication of the changes that were afoot. On the international stage, Prague’s own political activities were reduced to a minimum and it began merely repeating Soviet ideological standpoints (Dejmek 2002, p. 31)

In contrast, the role of Czechoslovakia, a Soviet Bloc country, in international relations with Latin America was very different. This was the result of the position Czechoslovakia had attained whilst penetrating the region during the interwar period (a widespread network of embassies, trade exchange). The exceptional position of Czechoslovakia was in part due to its economic prowess and the status it held in comparison to that of the other countries within the Soviet Bloc. For example, the Czechoslovakian arms industry was highly acclaimed and its production output was capable of meeting the demands of nationalistic regimes. All the same, adhering to this tradition was very difficult during the first post-war years. As a matter of fact, the atmosphere surrounding the incipient Cold War severely affected ties between Czechoslovakia and Latin America. In 1947, Chile, under considerable pressure from the USA, broke off all economic and political ties with Czechoslovakia. One year later Colombia and Peru followed suit, closing their embassies in Prague. In 1952, Venezuela also severed its links with the country. These links with Latin American countries would only be rebuilt and fully restored after Stalin’s death. The Cuban Revolution a few months later would mark the start of a new chapter in relationships by reigniting interest in the region within the Eastern Bloc (Opatrný, Zourek, Majlátová, Pelant 2015; Bortlová 2013; Březinová 2013, Opatrný 2013).

The aim of this study is to analyse the economic relationships between Czechoslovakia and Argentina in 1945–1955 by means of archival documents. The relationship was highly specific compared to that with other countries in the region. Argentina, a significant exporter of agricultural products, was undeniably one of Czechoslovakia’s largest trading partners. This was reciprocal. Czechoslovakia viewed Argentina as a key export market for its commodities. Furthermore, in contrast to other nation’s notable lack of interest in the region, economic circumstances made Czechoslovakian authorities keenly aware of the opportunities Argentina provided. However, the election of Juan Domingo Perón, a charismatic populist, to the office of president, represented a crucial turning point in Argentinian domestic and international politics. The mutual economic relationship will be analysed within the context of these two main factors. In the conclusion of the study a comparison is made of Czechoslovakian foreign commerce with Argentina and that of other countries in Latin America.

Tradition of Economic Exchange

In the 1920's and 1930's Argentina was unquestionably Latin America's largest trading partner with Czechoslovakia. The trade with Argentina accounted for approximately one-third of Czechoslovakia's mutual trade with the continent (Novotný, Šouša 1997). In terms of exports, Argentina was ranked as the country's third largest non-European trading partner. Argentina mainly exported agricultural related products to Czechoslovakia e.g. corn, leather, wool, plants and seeds. On the Czechoslovak side the range of goods was broader. In the 1920's exports included sugar, malt, hops, iron and steel products and glass. In the 1930's the interest in the Argentinian market only grew as a result of the Great Depression. In this decade, exports also included military arms and engineering products (Novotný, Šouša 1990; Bouček 1988). At the same time the role of the Czech and Slovakian communities¹ engaged in the development of the Argentinian sugar, beer (Novotný, Šouša 1993; Novotný, Šouša 1994) and engineering industries, grew in importance.

The first major sign of the significance of the mutual business relations dates back to 1937. In that year a trade agreement was negotiated and signed to the benefit of both nations. The agreement came into interim force in the same year; however it was never ratified by either party. The level of international trade between the two nations peaked during 1937–1938. Examples of the business links that existed include Škoda Platense and Baťa. Škoda Platense, which had been re-established after World War I, set up a business in Argentina. In 1938, that business represented the single most significant Czechoslovakian subsidiary on the continent. At the time, Baťa enterprises also had significant interests in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. However, In March 1939, Argentina approved the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Furthermore, Argentina's strained relationships with Axis countries and the USA, thwarted the restoration of diplomatic relations (Nálevka 1975). Relations were eventually restored on 18th April 1945 via an exchange of notes between the Czechoslovakian and Argentinian governments.

Peronism and Soviet Bloc Countries

Argentina, during Juan Domingo Perón's regime (1946–1955), endeavoured to engage in so-called Third Way Politics. Its goal was to implement international politics by means of promoting independence from the then world powers – USA and Soviet Union. This was undoubtedly a bold and decisive step when taking into consideration where the military might at that time lay (Siepe, Llairó, Gale 1994). The existence of an "Eastern hand" would serve to reinforce the region's influence and secure a negotiating position with Washington. It is with this in mind, that two days after Perón's takeover, Argentina established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. It is a well-known fact that in 1947, Perón, in contrast to neighbouring Chile, declined to follow the USA appeal to revoke diplomatic relationships with Eastern Bloc countries. On the contrary, the president clearly signalled that Argentinian international policy would be independent of Washington. Argentina subsequently signed a series of business contracts (1947 Czechoslovakia, Romania; 1948 Hungary, Poland; 1949 Bulgaria).

¹ According to estimates by the Czechoslovakian Foreign Institution, 45,000 compatriots were living in Argentina in 1945 – 25,000 Slovaks and 20,000 Czechs. Archiv ministerstva zahraničních věcí (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech Republic, AMFA), f. Dokumentace teritoriálních odborů (Territorial Departments Documentation, TDD), Argentina, book 45, K historii slovenské emigrace v Argentině, p. 6.

In contrast, Perón's domestic politics were distinctly different. He enthusiastically endorsed anti-communism. As a result, most compatriot schools, clubs and associations were shut down. Those that remained open did so under the control of the state security apparatus, or were deprived of the use of their facilities. Hence, the Czechoslovakian compatriot community suffered severe disruption (Zourek 2014). In order to prevent communist propaganda, the measures went so far as to limit the number of admitted Slavic citizens to those who possessed diplomatic or official passports.² Those who were admitted were subjected to strict audits.

The anti-communist politics and rhetoric came in for fierce criticism by Moscow. The president was considered a leading representative of a "fascist" regime, whose popularity was grounded on demagoguery.³ Unscrupulous information on Argentina subsequently started to appear in Czechoslovakian media (Zourek, 2014). Indeed, an Argentinian emissary states in a report from 1952 that "current leading authorities neither deserve our confidence, nor our thoughts or special consideration. It's a government which shrinks from any responsibility for its actions, and thus, falls back on supreme arrogance. To put it in another way, we are dealing with a communist police state."⁴

However, mutual relations improved during Perón's second mandate (1952–1955) due to the improving economic situation on the global market. The war-torn western European economies began to stabilize, which implied a declining demand for Argentinian merchandise. This resulted in foreign exchange shortages for the purchase of machines and materials. Industrialization was an intrinsic part of Perón's plan. These facts combined, forced a rethink in strategy and resulted in a rekindled interest in eastern European markets. The war-devastated Soviet Union had been struggling with a huge corn deficit. In 1953, Argentina stepped in to fill the gap and thereby became the very first Latin American country to sign a business contract with the Soviet Union. Czechoslovakia also proved to be an equal partner because it was the only Eastern-Bloc country proficient in importing engineering equipment to Argentina.⁵ Unfortunately, Perón was deposed in a military coup in 1955. As a result, Eduardo Lonardi took lead of the country, only to be replaced a few weeks later by Pedro Aramburu. Czechoslovakia, as pragmatic as ever, and in striving to maintain and develop its economic cooperation, promptly recognized the new transitional government.

Economic Cooperation

Argentina, whose economy had been booming, was considered a valuable trading partner with large surpluses of commodities the Czechoslovak economy required (wool, raw leather, meat, tanning, feedstuff, corn, plant oils, etc.). Perón's industrialization plan also created invaluable opportunities to export Czechoslovakian engineering products which had a formidable reputation dating back to the pre-war period. In the autumn of

² Archivo Histórico de Cancillería (Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Argentina, DAMF), División política: Checoslovaquia – Arabia Saudita – Bulgaria, 1950, box nr. 1, El Departamento de Política, 27/5/1950.

³ AMFA, f. Porady kolegia (Collegium meetings), 1953–1989, book 14, Zpráva o Argentině a čs. argentinských stycích, Pro schůzi kolegia MZV, 2/6/1955, p. 11.

⁴ DAMF, División política: Checoslovaquia, 1951, Elevar Memoria Estadística, 11/1/1952.

⁵ AMFA, f. Teritoriální odbory–tajné (Territorial Departments–Secret, TD-S), Argentina – průběh a stav obchodně-politických jednání, 4/12/1954.

1946, Czechoslovakia sent a trade mission lead by Vladimír Khek to Argentina in order to strengthen the economic relations. The mission negotiated with Brazilian and Uruguayan representatives, namely with the Minister of the Foreign Affairs and the managing director of the central bank. The negotiations were remarkably tough and the Argentinian government declined to ratify the agreement that had been struck. From 1937, the country claimed that it would no longer provide other countries with tangible benefits (*La Nación* 1946). The mutual business connections therefore progressed without any beneficial international contractual arrangements.⁶

As a result, a trade mission came to Buenos Aires in the summer of 1947 and signed a new business contract on 2nd July via IAPI (Instituto Argentino de Promoción de Cambio). As part of the agreement, which held until the end of 1951, Czechoslovakia imported 30,000 tonnes of wheat, maize, quebracha, leather, wool and plant oils. As of 1948, the imports were boosted with the inclusion of linen oil, farina and eggs. The payments were arranged through the establishment of clearing accounts and lists of merchandise. Although the passive balance was subject to a foreign-exchange payment or payment in gold, this official regulation was never enforced. Argentina had acceded the transfer of the account balance to the following year, whereby Czechoslovakia ran up huge debts.⁷

In 1948, the then managing director of the Czech National Bank, Leopold Chmela, flew to Argentina to discuss the issue. As a matter of fact, the debt was subject to payments in kind in the form of food and arms supplies. As a result of the international political situation, the orders for Czechoslovakian arms had been blocked. The mounting debt therefore only rose further to new heights. In 1953, the debt stood at CSK 600 million (Czechoslovak Crowns).⁸ The thorny issue was dealt with by the signing of a new trade agreement in November 1952.

Despite all the political issues, Argentina, under Perón's first term as president, was ranked as one of Czechoslovakia's most thriving markets outside Europe. In 1947-1951, Czechoslovakia exported 15,000 tonnes of iron, barrels, rails and steel to Argentina. The most outstanding order was for the construction of a distillery in San Nicolás. Work on the distillery commenced in 1947. Although it was set to be the biggest distillery in the world, it was never put into operation because the price of the maize, from which the alcohol was to be made, had exceeded the price of the final product. As a result, the ambitious project fell through.

Despite the improving diplomatic relations, there was a sharp decline in trade between the countries in the period 1952-1954. Several factors played a role in this. The Czechoslovakian economy gave preference to exports to the countries with the possibility of free foreign exchange. Broadly speaking, the clearing trade system meant that Argentina was not a top priority. If it had been the potential for Czechoslovakian exports would have stagnated. At this time, Argentina had also started conducting negotiations with the USSR and CSR for drilling rig supplies for diesel oil extraction.⁹ An Argentinian finance committee visited Czechoslovakia at the end of February 1954 to

⁶ AMFA, TD-S, Argentina 1955-1959, Jednání o čs.-argentinskou obchodní smlouvu, 7/8/1954.

⁷ AMFA, f. Collegium meetings 1953-1989, book 14, Zpráva o Argentině a čs. argentinských stycích, 2/6/1955.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

this end.¹⁰ They eventually reached an agreement with North American companies instead. The only official Czechoslovakian visit to Perón's Argentina took place in the autumn of 1954. The fact that Josef Horn, a deputy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was received by the President, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Finance, and Commerce, as well as the Home Secretary, confirms that Argentina attached great importance to the mutual relationship.¹¹

All the same, a sorry affair arose with regards to a certain rolling mill which had been ordered by a Czechoslovakian metallurgical manufacturing facility Báňská in the USA in 1947. However unsettling the experience was, it did not significantly affect the flourishing trade. In fact, the rolling mill, for which the Czechoslovakian party had paid USD 16 million, was to be delivered in 1949. However, the political situation had dramatically changed. On the basis of a strict embargo imposed on exports to socialistic countries, American authorities declined to grant permission for shipments to be exported. The Czechoslovakian government therefore sought to sell the rolling mill to a third country. In November 1953, a purchaser was finally found and an agreement reached for USD 10 million. The USA promptly responded and decided to sell the rolling mill by means of an auction. As a result, Argentina bought the rolling mill for USD 9 million, which were later distributed among the "victims" of nationalization.¹²

On 27th January 1955, after four months of negotiations, a business contract was signed on the grounds of which the trade exchange was to increase. The contract came into force on 11th February. As part of the contract, the Ministry of Commerce set up an engineering centre in Argentina, the activities of which were to be extended to neighbouring countries.¹³ On 5th July 1955, a valid contract was drawn up between PZO Technoexport and Combustibles Solidos (ENDE), an Argentinian Ministry of Industry enterprise. The contract covered the delivery and installation of electrical-mechanical equipment, as well as steel constructions for a coal preparation plant in Patagonian Rio Turbio. The value of the order was USD 1,686,000.¹⁴ The construction of this manufacturing plant was considered to be Czechoslovakia's greatest achievement in Argentina in the 1950's. Under the agreement, huge numbers of tractors, lorries, looms and machines were also imported into Argentina. However, there was always the assertion that the levels of commerce were accompanied by scandalous levels of bribery due to the cut-throat international competition that existed.¹⁵ Accordingly, in 1955, an Argentinian request to produce artillery barrels was met with general approval.¹⁶

¹⁰ DAMF, División política: Checoslovaquia, 1951, Informar sobre Delegación Comercial Argentina, 15/3/1954.

¹¹ AMFA, TD-S, Argentina 1945–1954, Argentina – průběh a stav obchodně-politických jednání, 4/12/1954.

¹² AMFA, f. Collegium meetings 1953–1989, book 14, Zpráva o Argentině a čs. argentinských stycích, 2/6/1955.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ AMFA, f. TD-S, Argentina 1945–1954, Mimořádná zpráva o uzavření dodávkové smlouvy mezi čs. PZO Technoexportem a podnikem argentinského ministerstva průmyslu, October 1955.

¹⁵ AMFA, TD-S, Argentina 1965–1969, Poznámky k situaci a výhledu našeho zahraničního obchodu v Argentině, 15/12/1966.

¹⁶ Národní Archiv (National Archive, Czech Republic, NA), A ÚV KSČ f. 02/2, svazek (volume) 57–58, archivní jednotka (archival entity), 73, bod (article) 11, Povolení k podání nabídky a vývozu zařízení pro výrobu dělostřeleckých hlavních o délce 9.000 mm a Ø vrtání 300 mm do Argentiny, 15/8/1955.

Table 1: The trade between Czechoslovakia and Argentina in 1946–1955 (in CSK millions (Czechoslovak Crowns))¹⁷

Year	Export	Import	Total
1946	15	20	35
1947	84.6	99.5	184.1
1948	76.9	111.1	188
1949	61.3	122.1	183.4
1950	69.8	63	132.8
1951	73.8	92.8	166.6
1952	28.7	36.1	64.8
1953	29.5	16.4	43.9
1954	69.7	46.3	116
1955	167.8	149.9	317.7

International Trade with Argentina within Latin American context

Although the levels of trade between Czechoslovakia and Latin America showed an upward trend, pre-war levels were not maintained for long. As a matter of fact, the Czechoslovakian share in international trade never exceeded 2% of its total capacity in any of the Latin American countries. In contrast, Latin America's shares in Czechoslovakian international trade amounted to 5.8% in 1949, 6.8% in 1950 and 7.8% in 1951. On the whole, the most significant business partner was, like in the inter-war period, Argentina. Despite the history, or possibly as a result of it, Brazil replaced Argentina as the country's largest trading partner in Latin America. This remains the case to this day.

Table 2: International Czechoslovakian trade with Latin America in 1937, 1946–1949 (in CSK thousands (Czechoslovak Crowns))¹⁸

	1937		1946		1947		1948		1949	
	EXP	IMP	EXP	IMP	EXP	IMP	EXP	IMP	EXP	IMP
Argentina	185,385	231,297	15,022	20,001	84,588	99,470	76,850	111,071	61,329	122,136
Bolivia	6,651	161	104	-	1,244	-	874	-	2,215	-

¹⁷ Official figures differ. Those mentioned above are quoted most frequently, thus employed by most resources. AMFA, f. Collegium meetings 1953–1989, book 18, Zpráva o vzájemných vztazích Československé republiky s Latinskou Amerikou, 10/11/1955; AMFA, f. TD-S, Argentina 1955–1959; NA, Ministerstvo zahraničního obchodu (Ministry of Foreign Trade), Argentina, 10/11/1958.

¹⁸ AMFA, f. Porady kolegia (Collegium meetings), 1953–1989, book 18, Zpráva o vzájemných vztazích Československé republiky s Latinskou Amerikou, 10/11/1955.

Brazil	85,313	172,908	53,862	15,521	38,949	116,336	64,951	80,470	73,193	35.,
Colombia	47,246	29,005	2,383	-	3,654	-	5,059	-	1,800	431
Chile	10,143	65,389	660	221	2,400	300	1,351	236	315	1,060
Ecuador	8,404	10,223	161	-	1,340	80	1,298	1,575	1,215	40
Mexico	29,050	52,613	6,829	1,981	13,995	2,628	9,461	3,969	6,026	12,854
Paraguay	1,609	6,750	25	69	529	835	1,907	419	2,857	1.707
Peru	18,744	22,185	460	-	3,420	2,450	4,100	1,700	3,640	3,075
Uruguay	31,094	52,174	1,817	2,032	10,540	2,280	15,653	10,439	6,323	5,965
Venezuela	24,151	4,250	2,532	-	16,195	5,594	10,528	4,182	9,554	-
Central America	70,184	28,399	2,048	1,000	12,120	-	15,111	37	6,710	169
Total	518,274	675,354	85,903	40,825	188,974	169,973	207,143	214,098	175,177	182,874

Table 3: International Czechoslovakian trade with Latin America in 1950–1954 (in CSK thousands (Czechoslovak Crowns))¹⁹

	1950		1951		1952		1953		1954	
	EXP	IMP	EXP	IMP	EXP	IMP	EXP	IMP	EXP	IMP
Argentina	69,797	62,996	73,733	92,831	28,656	36,047	29,523	16,368	69,729	46,317
Bolivia	722	2	1,289	-	1,298	-	1,040	-	2,440	-
Brazil	61,877	55,828	51,642	97,388	30,514	40,718	50,278	55,943	90,652	87,470
Colombia	3,130	-	2,443	-	2,974	-	6,011	1,457	4,456	-
Chile	390	1,000	200	-	99	-	343	718	2,634	6,391
Ecuador	1,913	119	1,822	420	2,820	-	2,029	360	1,819	1,956
Mexico	10,390	1,731	12,756	16,990	8,680	8,260	7,905	3,049	7,409	8,284
Paraguay	2,424	2,305	195	49	46	-	17	-	77	357
Peru	8,900	2,790	7,300	2,300	3,450	-	438	-	116	-
Uruguay	11,400	6,677	5,635	4,622	3,732	7,296	3,637	3,021	2,234	16,555
Venezuela	12,653	646	8,448	-	7,664	-	7,643	-	7,595	251
Central America	14,553	739	16,676	1,653	20,477	-	13,163	1,828	13,383	1,458
Total	198,159	134,833	182,139	216,253	110,410	92,321	122,027	82,744	202,545	169,039

¹⁹ Idem.

Conclusion

On the whole, the relationship between communist Czechoslovakia and Perón's Argentina could be described as fraught and tumultuous with regards to the politics concerned. Perón's domestic political agenda was radically anti-communist. He was therefore described as a fascistic dictator in the countries of the Eastern Bloc. On the economic front the situation was very different. Perón and his government signed a range of business contracts in order to create a better negotiating position with the USA. For Czechoslovakia, the strongest incentives for trade were the Argentinian export system and Perón's industrialization plans.

In general, Czechoslovakia implemented several outstanding orders e.g. the construction of the world's biggest distillery in San Nicolás, although its potential was never fulfilled. Besides the political instability, which culminated in the fall of the established regime, there was mutual trade. The level of trade was limited by the characteristics of the clearing system. Communist countries, Czechoslovakia included, desperately needed hard currency and therefore focused its efforts on exporting to the countries of the capitalist world.

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