‘Along Footpaths over Snow-Covered Mountains...’ Historical Perspectives on Migration Journeys across the France–Italy Border (1945–1960)

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/7121>
DOI: 10.4000/rga.7121
ISSN: 1760-7426

This article is a translation of:

« Par les sentiers de la montagne enneigée... »
Perspectives historiques sur les parcours migratoires à travers la frontière franco-italienne
(1945-1960) - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/7037> [fr]

Publisher:

Association pour la diffusion de la recherche alpine, UGA Éditions/Université Grenoble Alpes

Electronic reference

Philippe Hanus, “‘Along Footpaths over Snow-Covered Mountains...’
Historical Perspectives on Migration Journeys across
the France–Italy Border (1945–1960)”, *Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine* [Online],
108-2 | 2020, Online since 13 October 2020, connection on 08 December 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rga/7121> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rga.7121>

This text was automatically generated on 8 December 2022.

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'Along Footpaths over Snow-Covered Mountains...' Historical Perspectives on Migration Journeys across the France–Italy Border (1945–1960)

Philippe Hanus

“Today, 13 May, I crossed the Little St Bernard Pass undetected. I did not report to the Bourg-Saint-Maurice gendarmerie because I wasn’t aware of this formality. I have two brothers who live in Vaux-et-Chantegrue (Doubs). I look forward to working with them.”¹

- 1 Like many people wanting to emigrate to France, Pierre Salvi, a native of Berbenno in Lombardy, set out in 1946 to cross the Alpine barrier on foot. Mobilising his family networks to map out a route, he followed in the footsteps of thousands of other Italians who had moved through the mountains for centuries (Corti, 2003). In the post-war years, the border regions no longer saw only traditional seasonal mobility but also new forms of economic and political migration that brought women –with agency over their own movements (Miranda, 2018)– and men from different socio-spatial backgrounds onto the roads of Europe. Thus, on a continent scarred by years of conflict, a “large immigrant fair” ²(Rinauro, 2009: 160) began taking place.
- 2 This article is based on an empirical approach that combines archive material, eyewitness accounts, and oral surveys conducted between 2005 and 2015 among immigrant families in Dauphiné and Savoie, as well as sites that people passed through on the way. This study aims to gain a better understanding of the processes involved in migration flows in the French-Italian Alps between 1945 and 1960, a period that covers the last big wave of Italian emigration to France. In addition to the analysis of public

policies, the study of individual journeys and memory paths in a cross-border micro-space (Aosta and Suse valleys, Beaufortain, Briançonnais and Maurienne) is particularly helpful in getting a better understanding of mobility. The ethnohistorical approach, which pays close attention to the witnesses' subjectivity, thoughts and emotions, sheds light on the migratory process from within (Mekdjian, Olmédo, 2016). Moreover, studying specific situations challenges categorisations and helps to prevent these migrations from being attributed an air of "sociological fatality" produced by the economic system alone (Sayad, 2006).

1945: intense population movements at the border

- 3 In the spring of 1945, gendarmes and customs officers noticed the resumption of spontaneous migration at all crossing points on the France-Italy border (Guillen, 1988: 205). By the end of August, the movement had increased both for individuals coming from Italy and for those wishing to go there to find their relatives after years of conflict. Early immigrants, accustomed to intra-Alpine mobility, were the repositories of nomadic know-how or "savoir-circuler" (Escoffier, 2006), which means knowing which routes are difficult to detect by officials monitoring the "green border" (Hanus, 2016).

Figure 1. Seigne Pass (Col de la Seigne, 2,516 metres), Beaufortain

Photo © J.-C. Foltête.

- 4 Because of a separatist movement among the Valdôtains, French authorities seemed to believe the latter were crossing the Little St. Bernard or Seigne passes not for economic reasons but to flee Italianisation and harassment. Between March and September 1945, the border guards were instructed to accept about 2,000 of them as "refugees" despite protests from the Italian government. On the crossing, they mixed with inhabitants of the Piedmontese and Lombard valleys and were soon joined by new emigrants from the

South, who were forced to leave the country due to endemic unemployment affecting about 2 million working people on the Italian peninsula (De Clementi, 2010).

- 5 At the same time, not only former partisans, Wehrmacht deserters and stateless persons but also individuals previously involved in some pro-fascist activity that is hard to identify attempted to cross the border on their own – desperate undertakings that illustrate the post-conflict human chaos and, in Italy, the loss of legitimacy of politically discredited local and national authorities. The reports by the gendarmes stationed at Mont-Cenis also related to displaced persons, mostly from Central Europe, living in camps in Germany, Austria and Italy, particularly in Turin (Cohen, 2000). These refugees with no legal status³ were suspected of seeking to enter France for purely economic reasons and were turned back by the police for lacking reliable identity papers, such as one Pole – liberated from the Buchenwald camp by the British and then transported to Italy – who had an “allied expeditionary” file, no. I-3078991, under the name of Mr H. but no further data.⁴ In an article entitled, “Modane, the crossroads of wanderers”, the special correspondent of the magazine *Détective* recalls an “emotional night in December 1948, when 50 ‘displaced persons’ who had been evacuated from an Italian camp were driven back during a snowstorm amid cries and tears”.⁵ Beyond the misery it conveys, this article reminds us that population movements in Europe represented a major challenge in the particular context of the post-war period and related to a social need, economic necessity and diplomatic relations. A “genuine manhunt” was set in motion across borders that were ambiguous because of the temporary fluidity of this European nebula where some states did not yet appear to be solidly constituted (Chevalier, 1950).

Official immigration channels

- 6 In France, at the time the country was liberated, demographic and labour force logic dictated the decisions regarding the selection of “desirable migrants” (Audeval, 2019). Unable to rely in the long term on the presence of prisoners of war (estimated to be 1 million individuals) from the Axis forces, experts and politicians agreed on the need to bring in 1.5 million immigrants, whose arrival was planned to take place over five years. Thus, the principle was laid down that the state must have control over a comprehensive immigration policy and that the private sector could not be given the same room for manoeuvring that it had enjoyed during the inter-war period. Faced with the need to “repopulate” France, which had lost about 1.5 million inhabitants during the war, demographers focused public debate on introducing “good immigration elements”, according to principles that had emerged during the 1930s through the assimilationist theories of the geographer Georges Mauco (Rosental, 2003). To implement this pro-active policy of recruiting immigrant labour, General de Gaulle ordered the establishment of the National Immigration Office (ONI) on 2 November 1945, which was tasked with selecting and transporting foreigners, as well as controlling their health status (Dänzer-Kantof, Lefebvre, Torres, 2011). In the autumn of 1946, the ONI network was set up with recruitment missions abroad. Thus, cohorts of workers arrived from Germany, Poland (Sudetenland) and, above all, Italy to be employed by French companies. In 1946, there were also around 20,000 Algerians, but this immigration took place outside the ONI framework (as Algerians were considered French) and was not related to an official policy of recruitment. If an

emigrant wanted to come to France with his family, he obtained permission as long as a sponsor – usually the employer – provided adequate accommodation.

- 7 After 1945, having previously been viewed with suspicion and hostility, Italians suddenly became the archetypical desirable foreigners in the mind and practice of the French state (Speyer, 2003: 41). Under these conditions, the issue of migration played a prominent role in relations between France and Italy – as demonstrated by the signing of two intermediate agreements (on 22 February 1946 and 21 March 1947) and a final agreement (on 21 March 1951) – that sought greater inter-state cooperation in terms of immigration policy. Over the next two decades, Italians routinely moved to France, largely in accordance with the terms codified in these agreements (Mourlane, 2016). However, this vast planning undertaking did not prevent spontaneous movements at the borders, which were part of a deeply rooted culture of migration across the Alps and benefitted France's rapidly modernising industrial sector.

Inside the ONI's 'sorting centres' in Italy

- 8 Candidates for migration learnt about the possibility of working in France through advertisements at town halls in Italy. They had to go to the emigration office in the provincial capital, where "good candidates" were chosen. These candidates were then taken via special trains to the "sorting centre" that opened in Turin in September 1946 and were subsequently transferred to Milan in the autumn of 1947. The huge Garibaldi barracks on Piazza Sant'Ambrogio housed the Italian emigration services and the recruitment missions of immigration countries like Belgium and France. It was also home to the *celere*, the anti-riot police unit, which created an anxiety-inducing climate among the migration candidates and caused significant controversy among Italian intellectuals (Colucci, 2008).

Figure 2. Photo of the Garibaldi barracks on Piazza Sant'Ambrogio, Milan

Photo P. Hanus

- 9 At the French mission, selection in terms of profession and demography was based mainly on the diplomas presented or tests conducted there. An age limit of 45 years

was set for agricultural workers, 35 years for miners and 30 years for other categories. One had to be not only in the prime of life but also in good health as determined by a series of radiological and serological examinations, which also included height, chest circumference, weight and blood pressure measurements, as well as the notation of diseases, hernias and varicose veins. The operation of this “sorting centre” was in line with the quasi-military nature of the process of selecting Italian workers (Gastaut, 2003). In addition to the medical examination, the emigrant had to undergo an identity check with the police to verify that he or she would not be “undesirable” in France.

- 10 In this overcrowded setting, the Italians decried what they saw as harassment by the agents involved in the selection process. Despite the official desire to see Italian workers arrive in France, some civil servants displayed a very lofty attitude. The racial vocabulary gradually disappeared from the administrative language because it was controversial on an international level, but legacies of racist thinking – learnt mythology linked, in part, to the principle of a hierarchy of populations according to their geographical origins – permeated scientific expertise (Spire, 2003). This is demonstrated by Dr Gessain’s observations in 1947 at the Turin sorting centre, which contrast the calm and “athletic beauty” of the Italians in the North with the “extreme volatility” of those in the South (Gessain, 1947: 83). Upon reading the testimonies of Calabrese and Sicilians who underwent this traumatic selection process, it is easy to understand why they might have shown great anxiety in front of the French officials, which could take the form of trembling, a fast heart rate and rising blood pressure (Gessain, 1947: 82):

“We arrived at the main train station in Milan. My travelling companions and I were placed in military trucks headed for the Sant’Ambrogio barracks. Women with children were separated from the men by a fence. We waited for hours in this menacing place. We slept in huge dormitories with very high ceilings. There could have been seven floors of bunk beds. There were about 30 of us per room. For the medical check-up, they made us get up early in the morning and parade naked in front of Italian nurses and French doctors. For the blood tests, there were three nurses in a row. One held the syringe tray, the second pricked us, and the third withdrew the syringe. It was all rather impressive.” S.B. (Saint-Martin-de-la-Cluse, Isère)

- 11 This traumatic medical examination was one of the most dreaded moments among the immigrants’ recollections (Manzoni, 2001: 34). Historian Mino Faïta, who himself passed through Milan, retrospectively analyses the logic of this selection imposed on the candidates as a kind of rite of passage:

“I understood that we had to come to France to produce and to reproduce. These were the two criteria, and the medical visit was intended to check them. The medical examination was humiliating: We had to enter France with our heads down” (Barou, Chavanon, 2015: 136).

- 12 At the end of the selection test, an entry visa was attached to the emigrant’s passport before they boarded a train convoy bound for the border station of Modane.

Figure 4. The ONI building behind the train station in Modane

Photo by B. Vanderlick.

- 15 On many occasions, the Italian press and even the trade unions criticised the conditions under which immigrants were hosted in France. It was because of the pressure generated by these criticisms that Rome sent the *Direttore generale dell'emigrazione* to Modane in December 1949. His report meticulously describes the ordeal the immigrants were facing ⁸: When a convoy from Milan entered the station, the first sorting was carried out, which included selecting those individuals who would continue their journey onwards with the same train to Lyon. Information broadcast on a loudspeaker directed the others to the ONI centre located behind the station. The latter, including women and children, had to walk, lugging their heavy suitcases, for several hundred metres across the tracks in continuous rail traffic. A few hours later, they made the same journey back to board the night train leaving for the north of France. Very frequent delays made waiting on the platform even more arduous. The report goes on to state that a coach that was normally assigned to transport immigrants was commandeered for "Sunday excursions" by ONI personnel. Furthermore, the centre's director was making money by transporting the luggage through a private company, despite the ONI already receiving compensation from the Italian government for this operation. Finally, it noted that Italian customs officers at the border put pressure on the immigrants to convert their lira into francs at an exchange rate that was worse than the official one.
- 16 The border post in Modane operated daily with a team of around 30 employees, half of them "sedentary" and the other half "mobile". ONI conveyors transported the cohorts of grape pickers, miners and workers to their professional destination aboard special trains. While most of the immigrants accepted their fate, some were reluctant to go to the mining regions in the North-East and secretly made plans to join work sites in the Alps, where they thought they would be better received (De Rosa, 2020). Life on site was organised by shared interests, in contrast to the administrative and employer mechanisms in mining and industry, where life in confinement made the workers

despondent. Finally, the difficulties they encountered while looking for decent housing in France in the tough post-war context discouraged about one-third of workers who were tempted to return home (Rinauro, 2009).

- 17 To overcome the administrative burdens of legal emigration and to avoid selection tests while still choosing their professional assignment and receiving family members despite a lack of suitable housing, many departing immigrants resorted to a “coping system”. Thus, they mobilised family or friends’ support networks, which enabled them to cross the border. Although one should treat the figures with circumspection, it is estimated that about 40 percent of Italian workers who entered France between liberation and the early 1950s did so in an “irregular” (illegal) manner (Rinauro, 2009: 148).

Crossing the border illegally, with or without a guide

- 18 Informal border crossings, whether by individuals, families or people from the same village, happened mainly between the Aosta and the Tarentaise valleys. For many of these immigrants, Bourg-Saint-Maurice, which is located on the border and has some major (hydroelectricity) construction works, gave them their first genuine impression of France (Faidutti-Rudolph, 1964: 251).

Figure 5. Crossing places in the mountains

Map: Virginie Combet.

- 19 Another oft-used route led emigrants from the Suse Valley to Maurienne and Briançonnais. They got off the train at Bardonecchia, the final station before the border, and proceeded on foot to the narrow valley, the passes of l'Échelle, Chaberton (near Montgenèvre), Le Clapier and especially Colle della Rho (Col de la Roue), as well as

the Fréjus railway tunnel, which was regularly used by pedestrians risking their lives. While most of them travelled in groups, it sometimes happened that young men, as well as young women, attempted the journey alone at the height of winter, like this Piedmontese woman who wanted to go to work in Grenoble: "I left Bardonecchia yesterday morning, 4 December, at 5:30 a.m. via the Colle della Rho and arrived in Saint-Michel around 8 p.m." ⁹

- 20 Some eyewitness accounts illustrate the solidarity in the field, as well as the emigrants' tricks of the trade to achieve their goals:

"A friend of mine had gone to work in Lyon. During a visit to the country, he asked me to go with him because we were sure to find a job there. The two of us set off together in September 1948. When we arrived in Bardonecchia, the priest showed us the way to the mountain. There, we came face to face with Italian border guards. We had planned to tell them that we were going to fetch milk from a barn in the mountain pastures, but my friend spontaneously told them that he had work to do in Lyon and that he was taking me along. We preferred to tell them the truth. We gave the guards a few cigarettes, and they let us through." A. G. (Saint-Priest, Rhône)

- 21 The emigrants from the South, who were unfamiliar with the Alpine environment, requested assistance from a guide to cross the border at high altitude. In the difficult post-war context, some multi-skilled mountaineers occasionally carried out this activity, which gave them additional income. Thus, the populations on both sides of the mountain in Bardonecchia and Modane created an economic niche thanks to immigration, whether legal or not, that included accommodation, catering and the sale of objects and clothing useful for the crossing.
- 22 The group of emigrants met their guide in a bar in Bardonecchia. There was nothing official about it: They sized each other up and negotiated a price for the crossing (Potenza, 2008). Sometimes when families arrived exhausted with young children, the guide showed some empathy by giving them a special price. Most of the crossings to Modane were over the Colle della Rho at 2,541 metres above sea level, which is difficult to cross in bad weather.

Figure 6. The hamlet of La Rho in Bardonecchia

Photo by P. Hanus.

- 23 On the eve of the crossing, the guide would hide his group in a house in Borgo Vecchio (1,370 metres) or a mountain barn in the hamlet of La Rho (1,650 metres). Before dawn, they set off to avoid the strict controls of the *carabinieri* and the much more accommodating controls of the French gendarmes. The guide was linked to his group. He usually felt responsible for them on the journey, which took the group along a steep path to the first French outposts.

Figure 7. Colle della Rho (Col de la Roue)

Photo by P. Hanus.

- 24 In addition to the guides who worked alone, there were also semi-mafia organisations that made a living exclusively off the illegal labour market. Some of these shadowy agencies directly recruited people in the South for emigration and organised for them to be transported for a high price. There were also criminal organisations in cahoots with networks of guides, such as the fake customs officers who robbed emigrants on the Mont-Cenis plateau or in the Val d'Ambin in the autumn of 1946.¹⁰

Figure 8. Press clipping, *Ce soir*, 31 August 1948

Photo by BNF-Retronews.

- 25 On 15 October 1947, two young children leaving for Haute-Savoie said goodbye to their parents on the platform of the Reggio Calabria train station and immediately went into hiding:

"We were travelling in a goods wagon. When we arrived in Aosta, we joined my brother Joseph, who was already in France and had come from Cluses with a guide. We reached the foot of the mountain before being told that we were going to take the bus. I learnt that the gendarmes stopped and controlled the cars but not the buses. I told myself that we were Italians and prisoners of ourselves. The bus took us to Saint-Didier. We were very worried. After the bus had left, we got down on our stomachs as soon as we saw car headlights coming, since we didn't know who would intercept us! We started climbing Saint-Didier to reach the Little St Bernard Pass. Around midnight, we got to the top of the pass. A light was shining inside a little house. I was afraid that we would be spotted. Luckily, nobody came out of the house. I was beginning to have my doubts. I told myself that in Italy we were almost being chased, but here, no one was reacting! Three hundred metres further on, the guide told Joseph: 'You know the route. From now on, you don't have anything to fear. Keep going down, and I will look for the others in Aosta.' We arrived without a problem in Bourg-Saint-Maurice! The station was being monitored. When the authorities saw people arriving in groups, they asked them where they had come from and where they were going. As soon as the authorities knew our destination, the problem was solved, and they didn't ask us to go back to Italy. It was only later that I understood that we were illegal immigrants from Italy and not from France." P. M. de Cluses (Haute-Savoie) (Barou, Chavanon, 2015: 198-199).

- 26 Using eyewitness accounts makes it possible to understand the extent to which crossing the border is a key moment in the migratory experience (Potenza, 2011); this is when "clandestinity" and "papers", euphoria and fear are all joined together under

the gaze of the sentry who watches and guards over the tangible lines of the nation-states (Green, 1999):

“We had barely started our descent on the other side (of the Colle della Rho) when the guide told us: ‘You’re in France now! Follow this path, it will take you straight to Modane [...]’ We’d made an effort to identify the paths since we had set off in case we would have to turn back [...]. We were still going down the slope when we came out of the woods and heard, ‘Halt!’ Immediately, four armed French gendarmes blocked our way. It was the first time I heard the language...” (Spica, Vors, 2013: 205).

Figure 9. Little Saint Bernard Pass

Photo © David Déréani-Facim.

When French employers engage in illegal recruitment in Italy

- 27 To work around the ONI's recruitment system, which they saw as too slow, many French companies dispatched their own recruiters to the poorest regions in Italy. On the ground, these recruiters illegally distributed employment contracts to individuals who would be likely to emigrate and whom they encouraged to cross the border illegally. On 21 August 1946, a squad from Albertville (Savoie) stopped the manager of a construction company transporting about 20 undeclared Italians in his truck. In the report, one of the passengers testified as follows:

“Yesterday, 20 August, at around 8 p.m., 18 of my compatriots and I illegally crossed the border to come and work in France for Mr C., an entrepreneur in Grenoble. Mr P. [...] had gone to Italy on behalf of Mr C. to find some workers; he acted as a recruiter and told us to come.”

- 28 Account corroborated by the recruiter, Mr P. (of Italian origin):

"On 12 August, I was passing through the Little Saint Bernard Hotel. Inside this establishment, I met a contractor from Grenoble [...] This person promised he would pay me all the days I work to find workers for him and would reimburse all my travel expenses."¹¹

Figure 10. *Ce soir*, 20 November 1946

Fonds BNF-Retronews.

A high-risk Alpine adventure

- 29 Although the French employers benefitted greatly from illegal immigration, crossing the border over the Alps at any time of year frequently resulted in accidents. Given this dramatic situation, in addition to their mission of patrolling the border territory, customs officers and gendarmes were also called upon to assist individuals who got lost in the mountains. One example is the search mission carried out on 25 April 1946 by the Modane squad to find two individuals who had disappeared near the Col de la Roue.¹² In the same sector, Alexandre Jorcin and Antoine Bouvier, guards at the Font-Froide pumping station, rescued dozens of these individuals "marooned in the mountains" between 1946 and 1950.¹³

Figure 11. Death in the mountains

Source AD Savoie.

- 30 One eyewitness recounts a fatal crossing of the Little Saint Bernard at the height of winter in 1945:

"On Thursday, 27 December, I left Ivrea (Piedmont) with four friends to come and work in France. We arrived the same evening at La Thuile in the Aosta Valley, where we spent the night. Friday morning, we got a guide [...]. There was a lot of snow, and it was wet and heavy [...] we were sinking all the way to our belts and sometimes even more [...]. The guide left us a few hundred metres after we had crossed over the pass."

- 31 Two members of the team were unable to continue and were left to meet their fate.¹⁴ Five other Valdôtains, who were also caught in the storm, would later find their bodies and report them to the gendarmerie. An *Actualités françaises* report (although it is unclear how these images were even captured) from 11 January 1946 shows a border crossing in the middle of winter. The reporters appear to have come across and filmed about 10 emigrants crossing from Aosta into France. Caught in a snowstorm, the group found shelter at the Hospice of Petit-Saint-Bernard; however, one member of the group died on the way. The footage shows the body transported by sleigh to Séez.¹⁵ The written press also recounted these tragedies: "Mountain paths between Italy and France lined with corpses" read a headline in *Ce soir* on 5 November 1946, while the newspaper *Combat* reported "women and children die in snow".¹⁶ Even if the media, for the sake of sensationalism, do not always report events entirely faithfully, these articles had an impact on public opinion on both sides of the Alps, as the disappearance of entire families in the snowstorm was very upsetting. The illegal crossing of the border and the human tragedies associated with it sparked indignation among left-wing organisations, in particular Italian and French trade unions.

Figure 12. Front page of *La Domenica del Corriere*, 17 November 1946

Fonds Musée national de l'Histoire de l'immigration

A difficult stay at the Montmélian 'screening centre'

- 32 On 10 August 1946, in an effort to funnel the many illegal Italian immigrants, the ONI set up a "screening centre" in the former Monfort barracks in Montmélian. This austere building, which had served as an administrative internment spot for Spanish refugees in 1939 and then for Jews from abroad in 1942, housed foreigners between 1946 to 1955 who had entered the country illegally. According to statistics, the majority of the residents were Italians from the South and "displaced persons" from Hungary and Poland. Foreigners who had refused to be assigned to a particular sector of activity were also forcibly taken there for preparations to be deported.

Figure 13. Montfort barracks in Montmélian around 1900

Fonds Grimal, Musée Savoisien

- 33 A few weeks after it had opened, the Montfort centre took in immigrants despite deplorable conditions in terms of comfort and hygiene, as an official placed there by the department's health and social affairs service described in detail:
- "The walls are damaged, there aren't electrical fittings in all the rooms [...] Dormitories have been set up in the corridors and in various rooms on the first floor [...]. There are no beds, just very basic wooden bedsteads with three bunk beds. In total, these bunks can accommodate up to 400 people. Some 300 mattresses are available [...] but the rate of admissions at present – 1,150 admissions on 8 October (1946) – means that only one in three immigrants can have a bunk. Some sleep in twos. The others mostly sleep on the floor [...]. Sanitary facilities are non-existent: two places to wash, a primitive washbasin, eight taps, five flush toilets and a urinal are the only facilities available."
- 34 He pointed out that out of the 1,150 occupants, only 12 were women. They were separated from the men's dormitory and had a single room reserved for them. There were no more than six children, and no specific measures were in place for them.¹⁷
- 35 Every day, 200 people underwent a full medical examination, carried out by four doctors, two nurses and two laboratory assistants, with help from a prisoner of war who was a chemical engineer. They paid particular attention to venereal, pulmonary, psychic and alcohol-related ailments and also did a serological examination; however, the radioscopic examination was not automatic.¹⁸ Those judged to be permanently unfit were sent back across the border within three days. Once the visit was over, and while the Prefecture services prepared the immigrants' papers, they stayed at the centre. The length of time varied greatly, and people waited until an employer turned up. Many residents complained that the food rations were insufficient.
- 36 Contractors and industrialists from all over France visited the Montfort centre every day. There they received lists of workers according to their particular expertise. The centre seemed to fulfil its mission efficiently: By December 1946, it had already facilitated the placement of 8,500 Italians in companies in the region, such as the

Société Nationale du Rhône, the prime contractor for the construction of the Génissiat Dam (Ain), and tanneries in Romans (Drôme), which recruited shoemakers from Puglia (Faidutti-Rudolphe, 1964: 333). Representatives from the French and Italian trade unions were sent to the sites to carefully observe these procedures and prevent low wages and possible swindles. In an article penned by Resistance fighter and poet Guy Marester, the newspaper *Combat* asked: "Montmélian, slave market?"¹⁹ The question is answered, in part, by a documented investigation:

"[In Montmélian,] the recruiters in town notice a group of Italians, approach them and pay their drinks. They collect information about the workers' professional activities and sometimes ask for references [...]. They then draw up lists and offer them to contractors for a fee. The future employer only has to present himself at the Montfort centre and pick the right candidates."

- 37 Guy Marester has "the painful impression of a world off-kilter" when he describes these men as "having returned from everything" and symbolising "the expectation and resignation of the entire continent". Following the publication of other scathing articles (such as Pierre Fournier's article for *France soir* in its 11 September 1946 issue, which condemned the lodging conditions and described the recruiters as "slave traders"), the Italian consul managed to ensure some improvements in the operation of the Montfort centre, particularly with regard to the boarders' bedding. The various eyewitness accounts and investigations related to the living conditions at the centre offer an obvious contrast with the government propaganda in the *Actualités françaises* of 5 December 1946 that the centre is "the brotherly gesture of a great country towards those whom the misery of the times has compelled to seek their bread in exile".²⁰
- 38 The centre closed its doors in 1955 before being razed to the ground in 1958. However, the traumatic memory of the place has been passed on to some of the immigrants' descendants: "My father used to talk to me a lot about this centre. He used to tremble when he saw it. I don't remember exactly whether he said, 'This is where we were desperate' or 'This is where we were disillusioned'" (M. B., quoted by Barou, Chavanon, 2015: 113).

Figure 14. Montmélián: contemporary development of the site of the former Monfort centre destroyed in 1958

Photo Johanna Quillet

Living and working illegally

- 39 A large number of workers evaded the filter of the ONI's legalisation centres, sometimes by having a simple tourist visa. Despite the illegality of their status, they managed to be hired as agricultural seasonal workers or in the industrial centres of Grenoble, Lyon and Paris. As far as the border territory of the Maurienne is concerned, the number of these "workers with an illegal status at the administrative level" in 1948 varied between 1,200 and 1,500; they were scattered mainly along Modane's hydroelectric and reconstruction sites. A report by the Italian Embassy dated 28 October 1948 details the working conditions of these workers, who received a lower salary than their French counterparts, did not enjoy any of the benefits of social insurance and could not send their savings to their families. Some of them nevertheless tried to carry the money they had earned on their person to Italy despite the risk of having it confiscated at the border.
- 40 In the hope of gaining legal status, these workers worked more than their French colleagues but could be fired without any right of recourse to the French Labour Office.²¹ They were also housed in "what looked a lot like barracks"²² and, thus, were reduced to living with the daily fear of being sent back:

"I went to France for the first time in April 1952 to join my father on a building site of Pascal, a company in Avrieux (Savoie) that was working for ONERA.²³ So I went to do the seasonal work with a simple tourism passport, along with two or three guys from my village. [...] In the ONERA buildings, we worked with Algerians and guys from all over Italy, and the gendarmes would often come there. During my first few

years in the region, I always kept my identity card in my hand when I went into town: When buying groceries, at the station or the cinema, we were systematically stopped and checked if we came across any gendarmes." S.B. (Saint-Martin-la-Cluze, Isère)

- 41 The experience of vulnerability was shared by this Sicilian worker who had illegally gone to Lyon in 1948. There, unable to find a job as a turner (a field of activity that was reserved for French nationals), he stayed without work for months at a time and had to undergo regular checks by the police, who threatened him with expulsion (De Ochandiano, 2013: 220). After some time, however, these foreigners manage to gain legal status because, in the context of economic growth, employers and public authorities had a favourable view of mass immigration, regardless of whether it was legal or illegal (Lejeune, Martini, 2015).
- 42 After the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and the gradual establishment of the European common market, the ONI started reporting recruitment difficulties in Italy. French companies found themselves competing with German and Swiss employers who offered better salaries. During this boom period for industry in the cities in the north of Italy, there was also internal and return migration. French employers were subsequently forced to diversify how they recruited labour by canvassing Spain, Portugal and North Africa, whose nationals accepted lower salaries than the Italian workers. Until the end of the 1960s, most of the ONI's activity consisted of managing the spontaneous arrival of foreign workers. More than three-quarters of the work permits issued by the ONI were issued after previously illegal employment had been made legal (Tapinos, 1975: 47).

'We were waiting for arms to arrive, but what we got was men...'

- 43 This visual statement by Mino Faïta (Faïta, 2010) expresses something fundamental about the condition of immigrants in the post-war period.
- 44 The policies pursued in France at the time tended to institutionalise immigration by trying to reduce it to a flow of labour that had been carefully selected. Although the ONI certainly represented a republican state committed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), when "workers" –and not "men"– are recruited, the logic is that of goods management (Blanc-Chaléard, 2003: 13). At the end of a monograph on the Italians of the Var, which was published in 1952 in the *Journal of Alpine Geography* (*Revue de Géographie Alpine*), Maxime Serre²⁴ rails against the "obtuse interventionism of those who recruit human capital" and denounces the legacies of the fascist period inside administrations. Adopting the cause of immigrants "reduced to wondering whether they are free beings or prisoners", he makes a passionate appeal for an immigration policy that would restore "individual freedom to those who have lost it" (Serre, 1952: 665-667).
- 45 The poignant images of these travellers dragging their suitcases bound with string across the platforms of a transit station; men lined up bare-chested for a health check upon entering the destination country, as immortalised by Jean Mohr, which was as much a medical examination as a rite of humiliation (Berger, Mohr, 1976); and finally, the group of "clandestine" Sicilians caught in a snowstorm at the Col de l'Échelle and

depicted by Pietro Germi in his film *Path of Hope (Il cammino della speranza)*, seem to prove him right.

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NOTES

1. A. D. Savoie, 11M115. Illegal immigration, official report by the gendarmerie, 1946.
2. Taxonomy is never neutral. We use the terms "emigrant" or "immigrant" in their generic sense for the sake of linguistic convenience, since they are commonly used in archive material and the academic field.
3. After the end of the Second World War, the term "refugee" included people displaced by the war who arrived in France, as well as certain specific nationalities –Russians, Armenians and Spaniards– who were cared for by refugee offices (Akoka, Spire, 2013).
4. ADS, 1398 W 52, Illegal immigration, official report by the gendarmerie, 20 September 1945.
5. Marcel Carrière, "Modane carrefour des errants", *Détective*, 199, 24 April 1950, p. 38.
6. The American photographer Latoya Ruby-Frazier, in the series "And from the Coaltips a Tree Will Rise", presents portrait-images of Italian and Polish immigrants who worked in the mines of Borinage (Belgium). The photos are accompanied by short biographical texts written by the artist, attesting to the empathy she feels for her photographic subjects. A retrospective of her work was presented at the Geneva "Centre de la photographie" in early 2020: <https://www.centrephotogeneve.ch/expo/latoya-ruby-frazier/>.
7. ADS, 53X25. Report by the department's population director to the Minister of Social Affairs, 22 November 1947.
8. A.C.S., minist. lav., busta 375. Note from the director general in charge of emigration to the Minister of Labour, 27 December 1949 (Lafond, 2008: 458).
9. Modane squad, 5 December 1945, A D Savoie, 135 W53, Gendarmerie's report on illegal immigration, November-December 1945.
10. *La Gazette provençale*, 22 October 1946.
11. A D S, 11M109, report on foreigners, 1946.
12. A D S, 11M109, report on foreigners, 1946.
13. *Qui ? Détective*, n° 197, 10 April 1950.
14. A D S, 11M109, report on foreigners, squad from Bourg-Saint-Maurice, 30 December 1945.
15. "Passage du col du Petit-Saint-Bernard par des émigrés du Val d'Aoste". <https://www.ina.fr/video/AFE85001261>
16. This dispatch was also published in *La Croix* and *Corriere della Sera*, 6 November 1946.
17. ADS, 53X25, Report, 9 November 1946, by Savoie's population director.

18. The Radio Télévision Suisse report from the health centre at the train station in Brig (Valais) on 16 April 1960 gives an idea of this medical examination: <https://www.rts.ch/archives/tv/information/continents-sans-visa/3444031-les-saisonniers.html>
 19. *Combat*, 10 November 1946, BNF, Gallica, A5N759.
 20. “*Chômeurs italiens venant travailler en France*”: <https://www.ina.fr/video/AFE85001788/chomeurs-italiens-venant-travailler-en-france-video.html>
 21. CAC, 19770623/71, Memorandum by the Italian Embassy in Paris, 28 October 1948.
 22. CAC, 19770623/71, French-Italian joint commissions, note by the French consul, 17 December 1945.
 23. The French national aerospace lab. A large wind tunnel that had been designed in Germany before the war was transferred to Avrieux (Modane) by the Allies after France’s liberation.
 24. Teacher from Toulon, activist with the French Section of the Workers’ International (SFIO) and the Human Rights League: <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article131065>
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ABSTRACTS

The goal of this article is to examine the processes that (both legal and illegal) migration flows across the French-Italian Alps entailed between 1945 and 1960, a period that covers the last big wave of Italian emigration to France. Beyond the analysis of public policies aimed at selecting and managing “desirable migrants”, the study of individual journeys made through a cross-border micro-area – that is, the Aosta and Suse valleys, Beaufortain, Briançonnais and Maurienne – enriches our understanding of mobility phenomena. Special care is taken to show, through eyewitness accounts, the experiences of people involved in the migration.

INDEX

Keywords: irregular migration, border control, Alps, candidate selection process, Italians, social memory, Second World War, foreign workers, mountains, dying in the mountains

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