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The 1956 Hungarian Refugee Emergency and the United States: Inventing Resettlement Criteria?

Abstract

The American-Hungarian connections have very old roots. In the wake of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, close to two thirty thousand of Hungarians were allowed to enter the United States. This paper provides an overview of the 1956 Hungarian refugees in the United States. However, one cannot talk about the United States' response to the 1956 Hungarian Uprising without mentioning the role of the international community and other States. This paper argues for a broader understanding of the international Community's response to the Hungarian Uprising with a special focus on the United States. The paper also puts the accent on the criteria followed by the US to admit Hungarian Refugees and the legal basis of the Refugee resettlement process.

Introduction

The history has been marked by constant influx of Hungarian immigrants to the United States. Groups of Hungarian immigrants started arriving in the United States in the mid-19th century¹. The first large wave of immigration took place in 1849-1850 when the so-called 'Forty-Eighters' immigrated to escape retribution by Austrian authorities after the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1848². By the 1860s, an estimated 4,000 Hungarians lived in the United States. Some stayed for a while and then returned to Hungary, but most of them became a part of American society. About 800 of them served in the Union Army in the American Civil War³. They even launched a colony of their own, calling it 'Új Buda'

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¹ FENYVESI ANNA: *Hungarian in the United States*. In: Fenyvesi Anna(ed.): *Hungarian language contact outside Hungary*. Amsterdam, 2005. pp. 265–318.

² *The first large wave of Hungarian emigration to the US*. The Hungary initiatives foundation. 2014. Available at: <https://www.hungaryfoundation.org/first-large-wave-hungarian-emigration-us/> (Accessed 5 November 2019).

³ RICHMOND, YALE: *Hungarians*. In: Yale Richmond(ed): *From Da to yes: Understanding the East Europeans*. Yarmouth, 2005. pp. 105–124.

‘New Buda’, in southern Iowa⁴. The second wave was during the last decades of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th ‘Great Economic Immigration’ that landed about 1.7 million Hungarian on American shores. These immigrants came for economic reasons, and they represented the lowest and poorest segment of the population⁵.

Later on, both the outbreak of World War I (WWI) in 1914, and the spread of fascism and Nazism in Europe, in the decade that followed, forced thousands of highly educated scientists, scholars, artists, and musicians to leave Hungary and Central Europe to emigrate to the United States.⁶

In 1956, Hungary was again under the power of a colonial empire, this time the tyranny of the Soviet Union, and again, Hungarians revolted against the repression. It should be said that the largest wave of refugees in Europe’s post-WWII history was the Hungarians fleeing the country after the crushing of the revolution and freedom fight in 1956⁷.

Following the Hungarian Uprising, the United States was among many countries that responded to the call of resettlement of Hungarian refugees. The operation of resettlement was unique in its kind. On the one hand, there is a kind of political guilt because the United States was indirectly responsible for what happened in Hungary. However, the failure of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 constituted ‘an embarrassment for the government of the U.S.’, which had provided moral support to regime adversaries through Radio Free Europe,⁸ but then failed to aid the revolutionists during the revolution⁹. On the other hand, the United States used its domestic law principally and a series of international directives to help the displaced Hungarian refugees.

1. The Hungarian Uprising: The international Community’s response

The Hungarian Uprising was one of the outstanding events in the Cold War era and had reverberating consequences domestically and internationally. However, the United States’ response to the thousands of Hungarians fleeing their country was not immediate for many reasons. Firstly, the Eisenhower Administration was afraid of causing a third world war. Secondly, the U.S. Government was paralyzed by two simultaneous crises, and could not effectively act in either. Despite that, the response to Hungarians who fled from is considered one of the most successful demonstrations of international solidarity to find

⁴ BÉLA VASSADY: *New Buda: a Colony of Hungarian Forty-Eighters in Iowa*. 1991/51. pp. 26-52.

⁵ STEVEN BÉLA VÁRDY – THOMAS SZENDREY: *Hungarian Americans*. 2017. Available at <https://www.everyculture.com/multi/Ha-La/Hungarian-Americans.html/> (Accessed 5 November 2019).

⁶ VARELA RAQUEL: *Fascism’s Road to Power (1929–1939)*. Critique, Vol.47, Issue 2 2019. pp. 331–351.

⁷ This revolution, also called the Hungarian Uprising of 1956[5] (Hungarian: 1956-os forradalom or 1956-os felkelés), was a nationwide revolt against the government of the Hungarian People’s Republic and its Soviet-imposed policies, lasting from 23 October until 10 November 1956.

⁸ It is important to highlight that, the inquest of the U.S. Congress (but other organizations) did not condemn the role of Radio Free Europe in 1956 so severely as it can be seen so far in the judgment of public opinion in Hungary. Source: RFE and the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. in: Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs. Ninety-second Congress. H.R. 9330, 9637, 10570 and S. 18, September 14 and 21, Government Printing Office. Washington, 1971. p. 24.

⁹ Resources on Refugees of the Revolution of 1956 in the United States Institute for Hungarian Studies, available at <https://hi.rutgers.edu/56-ers-collection> (accessed 17 December 2019).

solutions to forced migration: nearly 180,000 Hungarians were resettled to 37 countries within three years¹⁰. In Vienna, a committee was immediately established. It included Oskar Helmer¹¹ and his team as well as UNHCR, ICEM¹², League of Red Cross Societies (LRCS) and several local and international NGOs. The LRCS would be the prime mover on the assistance front, and would also assist ICEM with the registration, documentation and transport operation of Hungarian refugees out of Austria. UNHCR dealt specifically with the legal issues as well as the integration of persons remaining in Austria.

In the same vein, the UNHCR served as the general coordinator. The UNHCR's crucial role was later endorsed by the UN General Assembly, which adopted several important resolutions in the days and weeks that followed. It is important to highlight the fact that the Security Council, on the other hand, was paralyzed both on the Hungarian front and on the Suez Canal crisis happening concurrently, because of the divergent interests of its members¹³.

At *prima facie*, UNHCR was not in the most favorable position to deal with such a mission. On the one hand, the agency was only a temporary organization with a mandate that was due to expire in 1958. On the other hand, the agency was without a High Commissioner¹⁴.

In spite of obstacles and difficult conditions, the efforts to resettle Hungarian Refugees have continued. These efforts lead to a remarkable performance. According to many historians, the three coordinating agencies and most of the NGOs that worked with them achieved an extraordinary performance¹⁵. Refugees arriving at the border were cared for by local villagers or by the Austrian authorities. They were rapidly transported to centres where they were registered and then moved on again, to camps, hotels or private accommodation. NGOs, including Austrian branches of the Red Cross and Caritas, assisted them along the way. Many employees were also recruited locally to assist refugees.

Despite all the national and international efforts, Austria was unable to handle the Hungarian Refugee emergency alone. The refugee camps in Austria were completely filled after a short time. At the end of November 1956, Austria attained the limit of its reception capacity and asked urgently for help to the Western countries. In this context, Interior Minister Oskar Helmer quickly appealed to the United Nations and specific countries for assistance¹⁶. The Austrian historian, Manfred Hermann Rauchensteiner, summarized the situation as follows 'Our country has done what is humanly possible. It is now up to the Western countries and aid organizations to intervene quickly, since otherwise our own people will be exposed to the

¹⁰ PASTOR, PETER: *The American Reception and Settlement of Hungarian Refugees in 1956–1957*. *carte door vegan Hungarian Cultural Studies*. e-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Vol.9 2016. p. 198.

¹¹ Oskar Helmer was born on November 16, 1887, in Austria-Hungary and died on February 13, 1963, in Austria, is a typographer, unionist, socialist and politician who has been long-time Minister of the Interior in post-war Austria. He was one of the political leaders of the SPÖ after 1945.

¹² ICEM stood for the intergovernmental committee for European Migration which helps to move refugees and national migrants to overseas destinations for resettlement.

¹³ PIERRE, JEAN-MARC: *1956 Suez Crisis and the United Nations*. Tannenber, 2012. p. 93.

¹⁴ In July, the first High Commissioner, Gerrit van Heuven Goedhart, died of a heart attack during a game of tennis and his successor, Auguste Lindt, was elected in December. Source: UNHCR. Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart (Netherlands): 1951–1956. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0b4d6.html> (Accessed 10 November 2019).

¹⁵ CELLINI, AMANDA: *The resettlement of Hungarian refugees in 1956*. *Forced Migration Review* (54) 2017 pp. 6–9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

most serious economic and health hazards by the extensive granting of the right of asylum to the unfortunate Hungarian refugees.¹⁷

So, the responsibility for solving the huge refugee problem that developed in Austria in November 1956 became the duty of the Western countries as well, including the United States.¹⁸ At the beginning of the Revolution, the US was a distant, hands-off observer of the unfolding events in Hungary¹⁹.

2. The US 's indirect responsibility: the politics of guilt

The United States was slower to allow resettlement compared with other countries, and preferred to wait and see if the situation evolved. Later on, the United States showed openness and willingness to welcome the refugees. As already stated, the defeat of the Hungarian uprising was one of the darkest moments of the Cold War. The timing of the Soviet military intervention in Hungary was calculated. The Western powers were deeply divided and weakened by the Suez Crisis, which was happening during the same period. However, the West was in no position to react appropriately and was forced to stand helplessly by as the Russians returned to Hungary²⁰.

As Bennett Kovrig²¹ observes, the policy of the first Eisenhower administration (1953-1956) toward the countries of East Central Europe that had set up in the Soviet sphere of influence after World War II was characterized by a peculiar duality.²² During his 1952 campaign, the former president of the US Eisenhower has made the so called peaceful liberation of captive nations an essential part of the Republican Party propaganda. Eisenhower criticized heavily Truman Administration's policy and considered that the containment of communism was not compatible with the United States as a leader of the free world and that eventually only a 'more offensive posture' would force the Soviet Union to abandon its East European domain²³.

For that reason, the American government of Eisenhower consecrate important sums towards funding of subversive radio stations and other such organization as well as Eastern European émigré organizations. Reference to liberation of the captive nations though exactly how it was to be accomplished was never made clear, was until October 1959, a staple of high level American political proclamations, which were transmitted to

¹⁷ WASSERTHEURER, PETER: *Austria and the Hungarian uprising in 1956: Neutrality being tested, or neutrality on the test stand*. COJOURN 1 (3) 2016. pp. 88–97.

¹⁸ Although it is beyond the scope of the paper, a very particular duty is notable too. It is worth mentioning that, from October 23, 1956, to December 31, 1957, 19,857 persons moved to the Federal Peoples Republic of Yugoslavia, 16,374 of them later emigrated to the West. Source: ATTILA KOVACS: *Yugoslavia and the 1956 Hungarian Refugee Crisis*. In: *World History. Review of Hungarian Academy of Sciences*. No. 3. 2016. pp. 433–449.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ The repression of the Hungarian Uprising. CVCE.EU. 2016. Available at: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_repression_of_the_hungarian_uprising-en-6d417fc0-2acb-40ee-975d-8008343a6f44.html/ (Accessed 15 November 2019).

²¹ Before WWII, Bennett Kovrig was a professor at the University of Szeged. After 1940, she moved to the University of Cluj-Napoca.

²² KOVRIG BENEC: *Of Walls and Bridges: The United States and Eastern Europe*. New York, 1991. pp. 212–300.

²³ CSABA BEKES: *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution and World Politics*. Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Working Paper No. 16. Washington D.C. 1996 pp.6–7.

Eastern Europe and the United States by various propaganda organizations. According to Békés Csaba, all those pronouncements has served to create the mirage, not only in the Eastern Europe and the United states, but throughout the entire world, that the United Sates, which had in fact “never shown any real interest in the region and had made the liberation of those nations a cornerstone of its foreign policy of the East west relations in general”²⁴.

Hungary was somehow a victim of Super power politics.²⁵ So the US foreign policy of this period was built on pragmatism characterized by recognition of the post World War II European status quo and the prevailing balance of power with the Soviet Union as well as the avoidance at all cost of superpower conflict. F. Feher and A. Heller argued that ‘it was against this general world constellation that the Hungary of 1956 revolted, though many or even perhaps most of its participants believed that they had the backing of the West in their struggle against the East’²⁶ The West's non-action left governments with a feeling of guilt. Therefore, Hungarian refugees were welcomed with open arms especially in the United Sates.

So, one can deduct that the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution was indirectly the American or Western responsibility. Therefore, the United States was among the countries that offered to take Hungarians refugees after the situation in Austria became almost unmanageable.

3. *Resettlement Selection Criteria*

Regarding the admission criteria of Hungarian refugees in the United States, one can cite at least two different versions. On the one hand, the representative of the Soviet Union declared the following: ‘The facts, however, tell a different story. They show that in the refugee camps the inmates are now openly being screened according to certain criteria. Thus, the Press reports that the United States is placing conditions on the entry of refugees which have nothing whatsoever to do with humanitarian considerations. Today a number of American newspapers have published a report to the effect that the refugees are being subjected to a full-scale interrogation designed to elicit their political convictions; pressure is being exerted to make them renounce support for the system of people’s democracy in Hungary ...’²⁷ And on the other hand, there is the statement of a Canadian immigration official that ‘almost all a Hungarian will have to do is to be alive’ to be eligible for resettlement²⁸. So, there two conflicting narratives regarding the resettlement selection criteria.

In the beginning, many states tried to fix some selection criteria for admitting refugees. But in practice, the Austrian authorities²⁹ requested states to admit not ‘only the young,

²⁴ Ibid. p. 7.

²⁵ According to Dr. Révész Béla ‘The Hungarian memory policy often sets the history of the 1000-year-old Hungarian state as the history of non-reciprocal sacrifices in Europe.’

²⁶ FEHÉR FERENC – ÁGNES HELLER: *Hungary 1956 Revisited: Message of a Revolution - A Quarter of a Century After*. London, 1983. p. 17.

²⁷ UNGAOR, 11th Session, 587th Meeting, 21 November 1956, paras. 134–135.

²⁸ MARKOWITZ, ARTHUR A.: *Humanitarianism Versus Restrictionism: The United States and the Hungarian Refugees*. *International Migration Review* (7)1973. pp. 46-49.

²⁹ In the weeks after the second, overwhelming, Soviet military intervention on November 4. 1956. 200,000 Hungarians set out on foot in the harsh winter, avoiding roads and paths, each with a single bundle on their backs,

the strong, the skilled, but also the lame, the sick, the handicapped, the uneconomic families³⁰, and additionally urged states to precipitate and simplify their admission procedure³⁰. According to Marjoleine Zieck, the criteria that were applied by the resettlement states can be classified into negative criteria, restrictive criteria, positive criteria, and the absence of any criteria³¹. The negative criteria include the exclusion of particular groups such as communists, possible agents of the Hungarian political police, criminals, gypsies, and hippies...etc. The restrictive positive criteria offered resettlement places exclusively to mothers and children, orphans under five, and children³². The positive criteria included the approach to take tuberculosis cases, refugees who were handicapped or in some way deemed to be especially difficult cases, and adults above the normal immigration age.

The United States was somehow among the states that apply selection criteria. However, the American health screening appears to have been quite rigorous. On the one hand, the Hungarian refugees had to go several times to Vienna for medical check-ups before being admitted to the US³³. On the other hand, the United States did not accept married and pregnant refugees³⁴. Moreover, the voluntary membership in the communist party were not welcomed as well in the US.

In the same vein, the US set a limit to the number of refugees it would take in. Although the US fixed a limit number of refugees, the number quickly was increased from 6500 to 21,000. Indeed, the US raised its entrance quota to 21,000 persons and considered the increase of the number reasonable and appropriate³⁵. According to the calculations of Friedrich Kern, European countries took in a total of 77,525 refugees, while the number going overseas was 82,330. Only about thirty thousand of these refugees were permitted to reach the United States. In fact, Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, was the center responsible for processing all of the refugees. Because the installation was an Army camp, the Army was charged with the initial responsibility for coordinating the resettlement effort and providing all of the services³⁶.

Moreover, a civilian Committee for Hungarian Refugee Relief under the chairmanship of Mr. Tracey F. Voorhees was established by President Eisenhower on 12 December

crossing minefields and barbed wire to reach the Western and Southern borders to Austria and Yugoslavia. The refugees were received warmly and with great empathy by the people on the other side of the border; authorities set up refugee camps. For information on the operation of the Austrian filter camps. Source: the Prelinger Archives collection which is available in OSA Archives: <https://www.osaarchivum.org/pressroom/announcements/Hungarian-Refugees-1956>.

³⁰ UN doc. A/AC.79/49, para. 25.

³¹ ZIECK, MARJOLEINE: *The 1956 Hungarian Refugee Emergency, an Early and Instructive Case of Resettlement*. Amsterdam law forum. Vol. 5, No. 2 (2013) pp. 54–55.

³² Ibid.

³³ HASLINGER, PETER: *Zur Frage der ungarischen Flüchtlinge in Österreich 1956/7*. In: Gerhard Seewann (ed.): *Migrationen und ihre Auswirkungen: Das Beispiel Ungarn 1918-1995*. Oldenbourg, 1997. pp.147-162.

³⁴ MICHENER, JAMES A.: *The Bridge at Andau*. New York, 1985. p. 239.

³⁵ NEMES, PAUL: *The Welcome Refugees: Why the West opened its arms to fleeing Hungarians in 1956*. Central Europe review Vol 1, No (19) 1991.

³⁶ CORIDEN, GUY E.: *Report on Hungarian Refugees*. Central Intelligence Agency. 2017 Available at: https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol2no1/html/v02i1a07p_0001.htm (Accessed 30 November 2019).

1956.³⁷ This committee played a key role in the resettlement of the Hungarian refugees in the United States. In addition, the committee's role primarily consists in assisting in every way possible the various religious and other voluntary agencies engaged in work for Hungarian refugees. Besides, the committee coordinated the efforts of these agencies, with special emphasis on those activities related to resettlement of the refugees. The Committee also served as a focal point to which offers of homes and jobs could be forwarded. Part of its role therefore is to coordinate the efforts of the voluntary agencies with the work of the interested governmental departments³⁸.

From the arrival of the first refugees on 21 November 1956 until early May 1957, when Camp Kilmer was closed, transportation was provided by 214 MATS flights, 5 military Sea Transport Service (MSTS) ocean voyages, and 133 flights chartered by the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration. It's important to highlight the fact that the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization and the Public Health Service executed the functions necessary for admitting the Hungarian refugees to the US, and various charitable religious agencies arranged for most of the resettlements.

4. The Legal Basics of the Hungarian Refugee Resettlement Process in the US

Many states accepted to admit Hungarian refugees in their territories but the question is what was actually offered to the Hungarian refugees by the resettlement states? UNHCR talked, about countries of asylum 'Europe' and countries of overseas resettlement, temporary asylum, resettlement in countries of second asylum, second asylum, relocation, and mass evacuation³⁹. Doubtful and ambiguous language and the same ambiguity was visible in the offers states made that vary from 'asylum', 'temporary asylum', 'transit', 'permanent asylum', 'settlement', 'permanent settlement', 'resettlement', to 'immigration', or a combination of those offers. 'Settlement', 'permanent settlement', 'resettlement', to 'immigration', or a combination of those offers. Based on its domestic law the United States gave asylum to Hungarian refugees.⁴⁰ At this level, it's important to highlight the fact that the United States did not sign the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees adopted by the United Nations and signed by 145 nations. Instead, the United States adopted its own set of laws

³⁷ CONDIT, KENNETH W.: *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy 1947-1949*. Available at: https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Policy/Policy_V002.pdf (Accessed 30 November 2019).

³⁸ Eisenhower, Dwight D. To Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, 20 May 1957. In *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, ed. L. Galambos and D. van Ee, doc. 163. World Wide Web facsimile by The Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial Commission of the print edition; Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, available at <http://www.eisenhowermemorial.org/presidential-papers/second-term/documents/163.cfm> (Accessed 30 November 2019).

³⁹ Letter of 11 March of the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Refugees to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, 11 March 1957. In: Coriden, Guy E. 2007. op. cit. p. 56.

⁴⁰ In 2016, with the support of the Blinken family, the Open Society Archives extended the scope of its research to other archives in the United States that also possess relevant, still largely unexplored records on the 1956 Hungarian refugees. The Blinken OSA is now making these recently revealed and digitized records available online for scholars and the wider public in both Hungarian and English. <http://www.refugees1956.org/collection/>.

which served as a legal basis for resettling specific groups of refugees for limited periods of time⁴¹.

Prior to the World War II and the Holocaust, American law made the distinction between refugees forced to flee their countries due to persecution, and immigrants seeking a better life. After the war, the United States and the international community used a series of directives, organizations, and laws to help displaced European refugees. In 1956 and 1957, Hungarian refugees gained legal status under the domestic American law. However, the American Law was unique in its kind as a number of those offered asylum would be given permanent residence, while others would be given temporary stay pending legislation that would authorise their permanent admission. The meaning of 'temporary asylum or protection' in the United States was a technical step pending the requisite legislation that would enable permanent stay. In other words, the United States offered two modes of stay temporary stay and permanent residence for Hungarian refugees. But later, from the 21,500 refugees, 6,500 would be given permanent residence⁴².

Conclusion

The Hungarian refugee emergency was resolved by means of resettlement states, including the United States. Therefore, one can argue that there is some indirect responsibility on the part of the Eisenhower administration, whose double-faced policy and liberation propaganda, contributed to the emerging of the Hungarian Uprising. Anyway, the resettlement of Hungarian refugees in 1956 and 1957 constitutes the first large scale resettlement undertaken within the framework of the contemporary refugee law regime and their processing and resettlement was operated efficiency. Today, the numbers of refugees in the world are not likely to decrease, and indeed, given the fluctuations of international politics, and many other complex reasons, including poverty and wars, the world's refugee population is likely to increase. The international community got used to so many international crises and unfortunately we are witnessing situations in which the amount of suffering is much greater than what we saw in Hungary.

⁴¹ United States Immigration and Refugee Law, 1921-1980 Holocaust encyclopedia

⁴² TEMPO, C.J. BON: *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees During the Cold War*. Princeton, 2018. pp. 70-71.

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AZ 1956-OS MAGYAR MENEKÜLTÜGYI VÉSZHELYZET ÉS AZ
EGYESÜLT ÁLLAMOK: ÚJ BEVÁNDORLÁSI KRITÉRIUMOK?

(Összefoglalás)

Az amerikai-magyar kapcsolatnak nagyon régi gyökerei vannak. Az 1956-os magyar felkelés nyomán, közel kétszázharmincezer magyarnak engedélyezték az USA-ba való belépését. Ez a papír áttekintést adott az USA-ba menekült magyarokról. De nem beszélhetünk a Egyesült Államok 1956-os magyar felkelésre való reakciójáról anélkül, hogy megemlítenénk a nemzetközi közösség és más államok szerepét. Ez a papír vitatja meg a tágabb értelmezését a nemzetközi közösségek magyar felkelésre adott válaszában különös figyelemmel az USA-ra. A papír hangsúlyozza az Egyesült Államok által követett magyar menekültek befogadására vonatkozó kritériumokat és a menekültek áttelepítési folyamatának jogalapját.