The Historical Journal (2025), 1–20
doi:10.1017/S0018246X24000724

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Hungarian Refugees in the United States between Cold War Politics, Economic Growth, and Labour Demands, 1956–1958

Sarah Knoll

Department of History, University of Graz, Graz, Austria
Email: sarah.knoll@uni-graz.at

Abstract

The resettlement of Hungarian refugees who had fled the Soviet invasion in 1956, from Austria to the United States, is generally perceived as a success story. Austria received extensive international support and most of the refugees were integrated quickly into American society. This great willingness to help is usually explained by reference to the Cold War dichotomy. But beyond political considerations, a close look at the admission processes also reveals that economic interest and labour power were significant factors that favoured reception and integration. And, although religious relief organizations played a major role in co-ordinating the resettlement process, religion was not a main criterion for emigration to the United States. This article looks at the process of resettlement of Hungarian refugees from Austria to the United States in 1956–7. It thereby locates the movement of Hungarians within the broader context of Cold War history, economic growth, labour demand, and international relief.

During a meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations on 26 November 1956, the Austrian representative Kurt Waldheim addressed 'an urgent appeal to Governments to give maximum aid to Austria and to that end to accept the largest possible number of refugees without imposing any formalities'.[1] Waldheim was referring to the high numbers of Hungarian refugees in Austria who were fleeing the Soviet invasion in autumn 1956, and the international aid that would be necessary to support them. From the perspective of the Austrian government under Julius Raab (Austrian People's Party, Österreichische Volkspartei), the influx of Hungarians placed a heavy burden on the country, which it was not able to bear alone. Instead, Austria referred

[1] United Nations General Assembly Official Records, 11th session, third committee, 691st meeting, 26 Nov. 1956, para. 6, quoted in Marjoleine Zieck, 'The 1956 Hungarian refugee emergency, an early and instructive case on resettlement', *Amsterdam Law Forum*, 5 (2023), pp. 45–63, at p. 52.

to the issue as an international problem, which could only be solved through international co-operation. The appeals were effective; Austria was not left alone.

The international support reached Austria quickly and extensively. As the Austrian government wished, most of the refugees travelled on to other countries, both in Europe and overseas, where many of them found new homes. One of the main countries which provided resettlement opportunities was the United States of America. The US government under President Dwight D. Eisenhower (Republican Party) did not hesitate to facilitate resettlement, although ways had to be found to overcome the restrictions imposed by the quota system of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, also known as the McCarran–Walter Act, and security concerns raised by the United States Congress.

The fact that the international community reacted quickly and provided numerous resettlement opportunities for Hungarians fleeing their home country in 1956–7 is usually associated with foreign policy interests of the United States and other Western countries during the Cold War.[2] This circumstance cannot be ignored. The phenomenon of people fleeing communist-ruled countries like the Hungarian People's Republic, especially in the 1940s and the 1950s, was regarded as a demonstration of the superiority of the West and a sign of the failure of communism. And the refugee movement from Hungary fitted almost perfectly the dichotomy of the Cold War. On one side was the 'enemy communism', which suppressed its own people; on the other side were the Hungarians, who were perceived as 'freedom fighters'. In particular, US politics connected support of refugees, and thereby also help for Hungarians, with its own foreign policy interests during the Cold War. The refugees were used as a propaganda tool to show how badly the communist system treated its citizens.[3]

But beyond the political interests of the ideological conflict, a study of the admission processes reveals other factors which favoured effective resettlement and integration. Special economic interest and labour power were the main factors for accepting refugees and, moreover, were important circumstances in the integration of the immigrants in the host country. Therefore, it was not only a state-directed process. Effective resettlement was also the result of the exact requirements of the host societies, which in the 1950s were in need of specific, well-educated workers. Capitalistic economic interests and Cold War politics thus intersected. In this regard, the research is in line with recent scholarship that has explored the importance of labour and economic conditions in shaping mid-twentieth-century refugee resettlement.[4] In

[2] I use the terms 'the West', 'the East', and 'eastern Europe'. It is necessary to note, however, that these terms are political and historical constructs. See Anne Appelbaum, *Iron Curtain: the crushing of eastern Europe, 1944–1956* (New York, NY, 2012), p. xxvii.

[3] Peter J. Verovšek, 'Screening migrants in the early Cold War: the geopolitics of US immigration policy', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 20 (2018), pp. 154–79; Emmanuel Comte, 'Waging the Cold War: the origins and launch of Western cooperation to absorb migrants from eastern Europe, 1948–57', *Cold War History*, 20 (2020), pp. 461–81; Jakob Schönhagen, *Geschichte der internationalen Flüchtlingspolitik, 1945–1975* (Göttingen, 2023), pp. 115–51.

[4] The importance of labour and economic conditions for migration management has also been pointed out by Tara Zahra, Emmanuel Comte, and, with a special focus on the United States,

this special issue, Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang shows how immigrants from the Dachen Islands were used as human resources to develop sparsely populated parts of Taiwan, and Shuvatri Dasgupta describes how postcolonial India used refugee labour to maximize state profit in arenas such as public works.[5] Beyond this journal, Sebastian Huhn's research on post-war resettlement in Venezuela shows how the recruitment of labour was also linked to race, as Venezuela focused strictly on 'white' immigration of skilled workers.[6] Linda Erker's case-study of Greta Mostny's immigration to Chile highlights the framework of racial capitalism, which favoured Mostny's integration as a 'white' knowledge worker in Chile.[7] Coming from a European country and being perceived as 'white' was also important for Hungarian refugees looking for work in 1956, as US industries favoured 'white' workers from Europe over African Americans.

On the way towards new homes and workplaces, Hungarians were supported by relief organizations, most of them religious. These groups organized the resettlement of Hungarians from the refugee camps in Austria until they reached their host communities in the United States. The process of integration was guided by the idea of assimilating the refugees to the 'American way of life'. The refugees should become hard-working, loyal Americans.

Hungarian refugees therefore represent what Milinda Banerjee and Kerstin von Lingen call the 'refugee political' in their introduction to this special issue. The Hungarian case highlights how nation-states, international organizations, private companies, and civil society groups administered refugees as a political project. But, as Peter Gatrell has pointed out, this actor-centric view only shows us how refugee politics operated and not how refugees themselves were part of the 'refugee political'.[8] This is why it is important to include refugee voices in the research.[9] Admittedly, working with refugee voices means sometimes working with sources that are produced by dominant national and international institutions. Von Lingen and Banerjee emphasize the complexity of this question in their introduction. Nevertheless, the current article includes the perspective of the refugees as much as possible, demonstrating

Stephen R. Porter. Tara Zahra, *The great departure: mass migration from eastern Europe and the making of the free world* (New York, NY, 2016), pp. 181–215; Comte, 'Waging the Cold War', pp. 477–80; Stephen R. Porter, *Benevolent empire: U.S. power, humanitarianism, and the world's dispossessed* (Philadelphia, PA, 2017), pp. 160–6.

[5] See Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang's and Shuvatri Dasgupta's articles in this issue, pp. 000–000 and 000–000.

[6] Sebastian Huhn, 'Rethinking the postwar international migration regime from the global south: Venezuela in a global history of white immigration', *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46 (2022), pp. 214–32.

[7] Linda Erker, 'Grete Mostny and the making of indigenous archaeology: European immigration, white racial hegemony, and Chilean nationalism', *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46 (2022), pp. 265–82.

[8] Peter Gatrell, *Free world? The campaign to save the world's refugees, 1956–1963* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 2.

[9] Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell, 'What is refugee history, now?', *Journal of Global History*, 17 (2022), pp. 1–19.

how the interests of refugees put pressure on the foreign policies of the United States during the Cold War.

Looking at the process of resettlement of Hungarian refugees from Austria to the United States in 1956–7, the article locates the movement of Hungarians within the broader context of Cold War history, economic growth, labour productivity, and international relief. The main research questions focus on the influence of economic needs and Cold War politics. How did the economic requirements of the United States help Hungarian refugees in the resettlement process? What challenges, expectations, and prejudices did they face? How did economic interests and Cold War politics shape the 'refugee political' in the United States towards Hungarians? And how did the politics emphasize refugee voices? Although the economic boom of the 1950s necessitated more labour, the process of integration in the host society, which also includes the right to apply for citizenship, was not without friction, nor was it equally successful for every refugee.

The article argues that to fully understand resettlement as part of the global refugee regime of the Cold War and of the 'refugee political', it is necessary to take economic growth and labour demands into consideration in addition to political interests.[10] This will show that helping refugees was not 'just' a political agenda or a humanitarian act. Rather, it corresponded with various political and domestic interests, such as economic development and the need for skilled workers. I therefore set global refugee history within the context of the history of global labour. By arguing that the demand for workers was a main reason to support refugees, the article expands the research towards labour migration and state programmes to recruit migrant workers.[11] Moreover, it shows how economic interests and Cold War politics shaped and constrained the potential of refugee resettlement. Those who could not leave Hungary or enter the labour market, such as the elderly and the sick, were left behind. The Hungarian case therefore highlights how the 'achievements' of the 'refugee political' were juxtaposed with the reality of the capitalist labour markets, which created a certain space for refugees to act and to adapt to the new realities. The 'success' of the refugee flow was measured in terms of acceptance and assimilation into the US host society, at the expense of those who did not meet the requirements of the labour market and of African Americans, as 'white' Hungarian refugees were given preference on the job market. This led to the creation of a specific capitalist 'white refugee political'.

A closer look at the state of research shows that the reception of Hungarian refugees in 1956–7 in the United States has already been intensively studied. Most of the publications focus on the political process of resettlement and

[10] The term 'global refugee regime' describes the principles, norms, decision-making processes, and actors that influence the treatment of refugees. See Laura Barnett, 'Global governance and the evolution of the international refugee regime', *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 14 (2002), pp. 238–62.

[11] Marlou Schrover, 'Labour migration', in Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden, eds., *Handbook global history of work* (Berlin and Boston, MA, 2018), pp. 433–68; on global labour history, see Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the world: essays toward a global labor history* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2008).

the efforts of the Eisenhower administration to accept as many Hungarian refugees as possible. Of particular interest is the research of Carl J. Bon Tempo, who looks at the reception of Hungarians as 'new Americans', and of Stephen R. Porter, who closely reconstructs the United States' Hungarian refugee programme, investigating both the foreign aid operations for Hungarians and the domestic side of the resettlement process.[12] Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan analyse the resettlement of Hungarian 'freedom fighters' in the United States from the perspective of the US government.[13] Irwin F. Gellman looks specifically at the role of President Eisenhower and his vice-president, Richard Nixon, and their interests connected with the reception of Hungarians.[14] The motivations of the Hungarians for leaving their country and their experiences when arriving in the USA are the main focus of James P. Niessen.[15] Peter Pastor focuses on the settlement of Hungarians in the United States, highlighting some personal success stories of integration in the American host community.[16]

All this research is necessary to understanding the process of resettlement of Hungarians in the United States. However, I emphasize in particular the importance of economic conditions and labour demand for the creation of refugee politics, and therefore use the Hungarian refugee crisis as a case-study.[17] Nevertheless, the Hungarian case was not the first major resettlement programme to the United States that also took into account Cold War politics and domestic economic and labour needs, and that focused on a specific racial hierarchy. The nexus of labour needs, capitalist interests, and race has been a constant phenomenon of migration to the US and has placed immigrant groups in precarious employment situations.[18] US interests in the Cold War centred on communist migrants as an instrument of the rollback strategy against the Soviet Union.[19] Both were, for example, visible in the Displaced Persons Programme of 1948–52, which was already a huge resettlement programme

[12] Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate: the United States and refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ, 2008), pp. 61–85. Porter, *Benevolent empire*, pp. 128–80; Stephen R. Porter, 'Refugees, statelessness, and the disordering of citizenship', in David C. Engerman, Max Paul Friedman, and Melani McAlister, eds., *The Cambridge history of America and the world*, vol. IV: *1945 to the present* (Cambridge, 2022), pp. 662–83.

[13] Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan, *Calculated kindness: refugees and America's half-open door, 1945 to the present* (New York, NY, 1986), pp. 49–67.

[14] Irwin F. Gellman, *The president and the apprentice: Eisenhower and Nixon, 1952–1961* (New Haven, CT, 2015), pp. 348–59.

[15] James P. Niessen, 'Hungarian refugees of 1956: from the border to Austria, Camp Kilmer, and elsewhere', *Hungarian Cultural Studies*, 9 (2016), pp. 122–36.

[16] Peter Pastor, 'The American reception and settlement of Hungarian refugees in 1956–1957', *Hungarian Cultural Studies*, 9 (2016), pp. 197–205.

[17] On religious relief for Hungarians, see James P. Niessen, 'God brought the Hungarians: emigration and refugee relief in the light of Cold War religion', *Hungarian Historical Review*, 6 (2017), pp. 566–96.

[18] Jia Lynm Yang, *One mighty and irresistible tide: the epic struggle over American immigration, 1924–1965* (New York, NY, 2020); Leonard Dinnerstein and David M. Reimers, *The world comes to America: immigration to the United States since 1945* (Oxford, 2014).

[19] Verovšek, 'Screening migrants'.

designed to meet the country's labour needs and foreign policy interests, as Porter has closely reconstructed.[20] The resulting structures and organizations were later used in the relief missions for Hungarians.[21]

I

In the autumn of 1956, protests calling for an end to one-party communist rule in Hungary were bloodily crushed by the Red Army. The result was a refugee movement which forced about 200,000 Hungarians to leave the country. Around 180,000 of them went to Austria, the first stop on the way to the West.[22] As soon as the news of the Soviet invasion reached Austria's capital, Vienna, on 4 November 1956, the Austrian government called for international assistance to draw attention to the unfolding emergency in the country. They requested financial assistance and swift support for the onward travel of the refugees.[23] Support for these demands came from both secular and religious relief organizations, among them the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, and the World Council of Churches. The UNHCR immediately called for the 'maximum possible international support' and especially for the 'promotion of the resettlement'.[24] The United States, in particular, was pleased to offer as many places as possible for Hungarians.[25] The demands of the relief organizations for resettlement were not contrary to the interests of the refugees. The Hungarians did not want to stay in Austria. According to information from the Austrian ministry of the interior, approximately 90 per cent of all Hungarian refugees registered in Austria wanted to emigrate, and the majority, about 86 per cent, wanted to go overseas, especially to the United States.[26]

Departures from Austria began almost immediately. In total, of the 164,275 Hungarians who reached Austria between 23 October and 31 December 1956, 93,148 left the country again between 7 November and 31 December 1956,

[20] Porter, *Benevolent empire*, pp. 101–27.

[21] Ibid., pp. 101–28; Schönhagen, *Geschichte der internationalen Flüchtlingspolitik*, pp. 72–4.

[22] Ibolya Murber, 'Ungarnflüchtlinge in Österreich 1956', in Ibolya Murber and Zoltán Fónagy, eds., *Die ungarische Revolution und Österreich 1956* (Vienna, 2006), pp. 335–85, at p. 335.

[23] Friedrich Kern, *Österreich. Offene Grenzen der Menschlichkeit. Die Bewältigung des ungarischen Flüchtlingsproblems im Geiste internationaler Solidarität* (Vienna, 1959), p. 83.

[24] United Nations General Assembly, A/AC.79/49, 17 Jan. 1957, UNREF executive committee, 4th session, 'The problem of Hungarian refugees in Austria: an assessment of the needs and recommendations for future actions (submitted by the High Commissioner)', p. 21.

[25] National Archives at College Park, MD (NACP), RG: 469, Records of the US Foreign Assistance Agencies, 1948–61, Office of the Director, subject files relating primarily to Hungarian refugees, 1956–61, P 216, box 3: loose-unfiled papers – Hungarian refugee relief Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, file: 'Hungarian refugee relief voluntary agencies, future role of voluntary agencies in the Hungarian refugee problem, 3 Jan. 1957'.

[26] Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Archiv der Republik, Bundesministerium für Inneres, Abt. 12U, Kt. 35, GZ. 203.179-10UH/59, 'Beitrag zum Österr. Jahrbuch 1958 über die ungarischen Flüchtlinge in Österreich', Abteilung 10 UH, Ref.: 'Sozialstat. u. Zentr.-Auskunft über ung. Flüchtlinge, das ung. Flüchtlingsproblem in Österreich, 16. März 1959'.

heading towards the United States, among other countries of resettlement.[27] The reception of Hungarian refugees in the United States was pushed by the US government and President Eisenhower himself. This decision was especially driven by foreign policy related to the Cold War. Firstly, the Eisenhower administration calculated that helping Hungarians fleeing the Soviet troops would be a strong sign of support for the ideas of the Hungarian revolution and would show other eastern European satellites of the Soviet Union the commitment of the United States, without provoking a larger superpower conflict. From the beginning of the uprising, the US government ruled out military assistance as a way to help the Hungarian protestors, even though they were counting on the assistance of the United States. In helping Hungarian refugees, the government wanted to counter the accusation of having promoted the revolution but refusing to help the rebels in their time of need.[28] Moreover, the Hungarian refugee crisis provided an opportunity to demonstrate that the non-communist world offered a better life than the alternatives behind the Iron Curtain. Finding quick resettlement opportunities and integrating Hungarians into American society was therefore a highly political goal.[29]

A second main reason to support resettlement was that the United States feared a destabilizing effect on Austria, a country directly bordering the Iron Curtain, and its newly established democratic polity, if the refugees stayed too long.[30] Thirdly, the government's and public solidarity with Hungarian 'freedom fighters' was influenced by the great international attention generated by the Hungarian revolution of 1956. The pictures and reports of Hungarians revolting were carried all over the world via newspapers, radio reports, and television, creating sympathy in the Western world and triggering anti-communist attitudes.[31]

To make the admission of Hungarians possible, the US government had to circumvent the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. This act worked on a quota basis, grounded in a racial hierarchy that favoured emigration from Europe. But the annual immigration quota of 865 visas for Hungarians had already been exceeded in the autumn of 1956. The Eisenhower administration and the State Department's Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs (BSCA) had to find other ways to accept the new Hungarian refugees and therefore needed to bypass the US Congress. In the 1950s, immigration and refugee politics were characterized by a rivalry between the executive arm of government and Congress. The administration favoured an immigration policy that allowed the admission of refugees, especially from communist-ruled countries, as part of its Cold War policy. In Congress, by contrast, both Republicans and

[27] Ibid.

[28] Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate*, pp. 60–4; Pastor, 'American reception', p. 199; Niessen, 'Hungarian refugees', p. 128; Gellman, *President*, p. 348; Loescher and Scanlan, *Calculated kindness*, p. 50; Porter, *Benevolent empire*, pp. 130–1.

[29] Porter, *Benevolent empire*, p. 143.

[30] Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and world politics: a perilous path* (Oxford, 2001), p. 84; Comte, 'Waging the Cold War', pp. 463, 477–80.

[31] Pastor, 'American reception', p. 199; Porter, *Benevolent empire*, pp. 134–5.

Democrats feared communist infiltration through the reception of refugees.[32] The State Department decided to work through two routes: the Refugee Relief Act (RRA) of 1953 and the 'parole' system.

The RRA was created to admit more refugees than the quota limits of the Immigration and Nationality Act would allow and was specially designed to support people escaping the Soviet Union or its communist allies in Europe. From the administrative perspective, Hungarians qualified to enter the country under the designation of 'escapee' from communist-occupied areas of Europe.[33] However, there was a logistical problem. The RRA expired at the end of 1956, so the BSCA was pressed for time. Knowing that security checks would delay the entry of Hungarians until 1957, the BSCA successfully lobbied to speed up their admission by shortening the administrative process of signing visas and waiving the RRA's requirement to present a two-year documented personal history. The administration therefore initially focused on speed rather than long individual background checks.[34] Under the conditions of the RRA, up to 31 December 1956, 6,500 Hungarian refugees immigrated to the United States.[35]

The second way to enter the United States was through 'parole', whereby President Eisenhower took advantage of a codicil in the Immigration and Nationality Act which permitted the attorney general to admit a foreigner to the United States on an emergency basis if the admission served the public interest. 'Parolees' were admitted without a visa, so people entering the country by this legal route had no official immigration status and could not become permanent residents or citizens. However, Eisenhower pledged to legalize the parole status to a regular immigration status, so that every Hungarian coming to the US had the possibility to stay permanently in the country. The parole system did not require the approval of Congress, and nor did Congress oversee its implementation. Again, speed and taking in as many people as possible were the goals. In total, around 35,000 Hungarians were accepted into the United States through parole.[36]

The reception and resettlement of the Hungarians followed a centralized procedure at the Joyce Kilmer Refugee Reception Centre, located at a military base in New Jersey. Every refugee arriving in the United States by ship or aeroplane was transported immediately to Camp Kilmer, where they were provided with all necessary support, including temporary housing and medical checks. At the camp the refugees were interviewed by the United States Employment Service, which determined their occupation, education, skills, and housing requirements. This information was used to 'appropriately catalogue' the

[32] Schönhagen, *Geschichte der internationalen Flüchtlingspolitik*, pp. 122–4; Dinnerstein and Reimers, *World comes to America*, pp. 9–14.

[33] Refugee Relief Act (1953), https://immigrationhistory.org/item/1953-refugee-relief-act/ (accessed 26 Nov. 2024).

[34] Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate*, p. 66; Pastor, 'American reception', p. 200.

[35] Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate*, p. 73; Gellman, *President*, p. 351; White House statement, *New York Times*, 2 Dec. 1956, p. 36.

[36] Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate*, pp. 70–3; Pastor, 'American reception', p. 200.

refugees for 'subsequent use'.[37] The co-ordination of the admission process was handled from December 1956 by the President's Committee for Hungarian Refugee Relief. The appointed head of the committee was Tracy Voorhees, a consultant to the secretary of defense who had gained experience with international relief missions for displaced persons during and after the Second World War.[38] The staff of the committee included employees of companies such as Ford Motor, Standard Oil, IBM, and Babcock & Wilcox, which also paid the salaries of the employees working for the committee.[39] This connection reveals close co-operation between industry and the government at an organizational level in the support of Hungarian refugees. As in the case of India, as Shuvatri Dasgupta's article in this special issue highlights, there was a strong connection between private capital and the state with regard to the employment of refugees.[40] The main functions of the committee centred on 'assisting in every way possible the various religious and other voluntary agencies engaged in work for Hungarian refugees', especially that work connected to resettlement.[41]

After the US authorities had completed the registration, the refugee was referred to the offices of the voluntary agencies to find sponsors who would provide jobs and housing for refugees throughout the United States. Finding such a sponsor or a job was highly important for leaving Camp Kilmer.[42] As Kati Piros, who came to Camp Kilmer with her husband and son, put it: 'We could not leave the camp until we had a job and we had a sponsor.'[43] To find suitable supporters and workplaces, the agencies conducted interviews with the refugees to learn about their skills, the areas they wanted to live in, and any family or friends who might be able to help them, especially financially.

For successful integration of the refugees, the President's Committee especially encouraged private persons, communities, and organizations to offer homes and jobs. Scientists, medical doctors, and students among the refugees got preferential treatment. Scientists were directed to the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences for appropriate employment. Doctors were referred to the American Medical Association for professional placement. Students, especially those with 'very promising abilities', were

[37] NACP, General Records of the Department of State, Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs, Office of Refugee and Migration Affairs, program files, 1953–7, Lyford's general correspondence file 1956–7 to Hungarian plans of RRP, NND 979042, RG 59, A1 5495, box 8 (hereafter 'Lyford's general correspondence'), file: 'Hungarian phase of RRP, outline of the organization and work of the President's Committee for Hungarian Refugee Relief in Assisting in Resettlement of Hungarian Refugees', 7 Jan. 1957 (hereafter 'Hungarian phase of RRP, outline').

[38] 'Tracy S. Voorhees dead at 84', *New York Times*, 26 Sept. 1974, p. 32; Porter, *Benevolent empire*, p. 138.

[39] Johnny Apple, 'US firms deluge Hungarian refugees with job proposals', *Wall Street Journal*, 11 Jan. 1957, found in 'Hungarian phase of RRP, outline'.

[40] See Shuvatri Dasgupta's article in this special issue, pp. 000–000.

[41] 'Hungarian phase of RRP, outline'.

[42] Porter, *Benevolent empire*, pp. 161–2.

[43] Columbia Center for Oral History (CCOH), oral history interview with Lajos and Kati Piros, 1979, p. 68, https://clio.columbia.edu/catalog/10920755 (accessed 26 Nov. 2024).

matched up with scholarships at educational institutions throughout the country.[44] The committee was especially keen to educate refugees in technical fields, in which the United States was in need of personnel to secure a dominant position in the Cold War, but also to teach them the 'American way of life'.[45]

II

The resettlement process organized in Camp Kilmer focused explicitly on ways to find work for the refugees and to integrate them quickly into the US job market. This orientation was both a political decision focusing on the Cold War interests of the Eisenhower administration and an economic decision reflecting the interests of the US labour market. Emphasis on the economic value of the refugees was, moreover, part of a domestic political strategy to sell the Hungarians as prospective citizens, who had all the qualities of 'good Americans'.[46] This approach became especially important when, in 1957, objections to the resettlement of Hungarians grew. Although in the autumn of 1956 public opinion in the United States had facilitated the admission of Hungarians, and members of the US Congress who were critical of the generous refugee policies had been hesitant to act, this momentum changed in 1957.

It was specifically because President Eisenhower paved the way for more Hungarians to enter the country through parole that the liberal attitude started to crumble among the public and in Congress. The focal point of criticism was security concerns. In particular, some US Congress members, such as Representative Francis E. Walter, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, criticized the lax security checks on the refugees, which they believed opened the door for communist infiltration.[47] This debate was by no means new. During the admission of displaced persons from the Second World War, critics had already highlighted the security problem of communists entering the country.[48] Walter was a committed anti-communist who served from 1955 to 1963 as the chair of the House Un-American Activities Committee, which investigated communist activities and their influence on US society. He and the committee were strictly against the parole procedures, not just because of security concerns but also because they bypassed Congress on immigration tasks.[49]

Because of the objections of Congress, the administration's efforts to push for more refugees than the approximately 38,000 accepted through parole

[44] 'Hungarian phase of RRP, outline'.

[45] Tracy S. Voorhees, 'Letters to the *Times*', *New York Times*, 26 June 1957, found in Rutgers University Archives, Tracy Voorhees papers, newspaper clippings, 1957, https://doi.org/doi:10.7282/T31R6P67 (accessed 26 Nov. 2024).

[46] Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate*, p. 75.

[47] Ibid., pp. 71–3; Niessen, 'Hungarian refugees', p. 129; Associated Press, 'All but 4% of refugees resettled, Voorhees says', found in Rutgers University Archives, Tracy Voorhees papers, newspaper clippings, 1957.

[48] Schönhagen, *Geschichte der internationalen Flüchtlingspolitik*, p. 71.

[49] NACP, Records of the Department of State, Internal Affairs of Hungary 1955–9, decimal file 864, 20/9-1057 to 413/4-259, roll no. 21 (hereafter 'Internal Affairs of Hungary'), Horace G. Torbert, Department of State, to American Embassy, Vienna, 19 Feb. 1957.

and the RRA were unsuccessful.[50] Moreover, security concerns and the fear that inadequate security checks at the initial reception had allowed communists to enter the country hindered discussion of the normalization of the status of the paroled Hungarians. Only in 1958 did Congress agree to a bill which determined that Hungarian parolees could present themselves to the Immigration and Naturalization Service for an investigation according to the visa-granting process after living in the United States for two years. When the Hungarians received positive clearance, they were granted permanent status and had the possibility of applying for citizenship after five years of living in the country.[51]

However, due to foreign policy interests of the Cold War, the Eisenhower administration wanted to continue with the reception of Hungarians in 1957. From the State Department's point of view in particular, the United States gained prestige through the admission and financial support of the Hungarian refugees in the propaganda war of the superpowers. The fear was that, if the United States halted admission, other countries would follow suit, which would leave Austria alone with the 'burden' and a large group of people with non-productive refugee status.[52] The ensuing constant disillusionment of the refugees would lead to voluntary repatriation to Hungary, as the State Department pointed out. This would seriously damage US Cold War policy, which encouraged people to leave communist countries to show the world the negative consequences of communism.[53]

As Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang has also shown in his case-study of the displacement and relief of Dachen refugees in Taiwan, refugees from communism were used as a propaganda tool during the Cold War.[54] For the US and its allies, refugees from communist-ruled countries voted with their feet in favour of the freedom and living standards of the capitalistic West.[55] Here the Hungarian case connects with US Cold War politics and economic interests of the 1940s and 1950s. As Emmanuel Comte highlighted, 'migration management' and absorption by the West of people fleeing communist countries were a political strategy of the Western Cold War to inflict real damage on the communist regimes. A main goal was to destabilize the countries in the East through a lack of skilled workers.[56] Peter J. Verovšek has shown how emigrants were perceived as a tool to roll back communism in the US fight against the Soviet Union in the early Cold War.[57]

[50] Gellman, *President*, p. 358; Niessen, 'Hungarian refugees', pp. 130, 134.

[51] Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate*, pp. 83–4.

[52] 'Lyford's general correspondence', file: 'Hungarian phase of RRP, Loy W. Henderson, Deputy Under Secretary for Administration to Maxwell M. Raab, Secretary of the Cabinet, White House'.

[53] 'Lyford's general correspondence', file: 'Hungarian phase of RRP, State Department's position concerning the admission of Hungarian escapees in the United States under the parole procedure after 15 April 1957' (hereafter 'Hungarian phase of RRP, State Department's position').

[54] See Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang's article in this special issue, pp. 000–000.

[55] Schönhagen, *Geschichte der internationalen Flüchtlingspolitik*, pp. 125–7.

[56] Comte, 'Waging the Cold War'.

[57] Verovšek, 'Screening migrants'.

Looking at Soviet exile in the United States, Benjamin Tromly and Simo Mikkonen have pointed out that the United States used emigrants as a 'weapon' to liberate the Soviet Union.[58] Moreover, both Verovšek and Stephen R. Porter have highlighted the link between economic interests and the absorption of communist migrants, as seen in the US Displaced Persons Programme of 1948–52.[59] Like the Hungarians in 1956, displaced persons were perceived as a welcome source of labour to counteract the losses of the Second World War.[60] This underlines the importance of economics during the Cold War. Getting the 'best' people out of the Eastern countries was both a political and an economic strategy to boost economic growth in the West and to destabilize the East through economic insecurity. Moreover, the policy showed the world the benefits and attractiveness of the Western capitalistic system. In the case of Hungary in 1956, this strategy was successful, as young and skilled workers and intellectuals in particular left the country, which caused a major brain drain.[61]

For most, the resettlement of 1956–7 was successful because of the post-Second World War economic growth in the West, which meant that companies were looking for workers. In particular, the 'golden age of capitalism', as it was called, combined economic needs at home with resettlement, to bring skilled workers, especially from Europe, to North America.[62] The State Department specifically referred to the country's urgent need for scientific and technical personnel, which could be found among the refugees, and it therefore targeted trained professionals such as nurses and laboratory technicians.[63] Highlighting the economic benefits of refugees entering the United States was also a way of 'selling' them to Congress and the public.[64] Thus, economic demands functioned as a political tool in Cold War politics, with the administration wanting to resettle Hungarians in the United States as a propaganda victory.

Emphasizing the 'usefulness' of the refugees to the United States was not just the State Department's idea. The foreign service office in Salzburg, Austria, which oversaw the visa and parole certification process, had already highlighted the 'reservoir of exceptional talents and skills that should be utilized in a manner mutually beneficial for the national welfare of the United States'.[65] The selection process in Austria, as well as in the United States, focused particularly on Hungarians who were useful as workers and, therefore,

[58] Benjamin Tromly, *Cold War exiles and the CIA: plotting to free Russia* (Oxford, 2019); Simo Mikkonen, 'Exploiting the exiles: Soviet émigrés in U.S. Cold War strategy', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 14 (2012), pp. 98–127.

[59] Verovšek, 'Screening migrants'; Porter, *Benevolent empire*, pp. 101–27.

[60] Comte, 'Waging the Cold War', pp. 461–81; Porter, *Benevolent empire*, p. 108.

[61] Murber, 'Ungarnflüchtlinge', pp. 378–82; Pastor, 'American reception', p. 201.

[62] Gusztáv D. Kecskés, 'Eine Geschichte, die die Welt betrifft: die Aufnahme der ungarischen Flüchtlinge des Jahres 1956', in *Jahrbuch für Mitteleuropäische Studien 2016/17* (Vienna, 2016), p. 51; Loescher, *UNHCR and world politics*, p. 87.

[63] 'Hungarian phase of RRP, State Department's position'.

[64] Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate*, pp. 75–81.

[65] 'Lyford's general correspondence', file: 'Hungarian phase of RRP, Hungarian revolt escapees: observation and impressions'.

were young and healthy. Elderly and sick people, as well as children, were much less welcome and remained longer in refugee camps.[66] Aid organizations were especially critical of this emphasis on admission on a purely economic basis. As the director of the World Council of Churches Service to Refugees pointed out, 'there could easily be thousands of women and children in the refugee camps in Austria who cannot be resettled because they do not constitute a labor force and their husbands are still in Hungary'.[67] Nevertheless, the key criteria for resettlement were the presence of relatives, qualifications for employment, and, to a lesser extent, religion.[68] Again this is illustrated by the experience of Lajos and Kati Piros, who emigrated to the United States after the crushing of the revolution in 1956. They were sponsored by the First Presbyterian Church, although they were Catholics, because the church wanted to support a family with a child and therefore cared less about the religious affiliation. As the family explained in an interview in 1979, 'We were Catholic, but they sponsored us because they wanted a professional family with a child, and they didn't care if we were Catholics or not.'[69]

The focus on the skills of Hungarians was not simply a strategy of the US government to legitimate their reception. Rather, the refugees fulfilled a genuine need in US society. In the mid-1950s, the United States was in the middle of a post-Second World War economic boom and was therefore in need of workers.[70] Job offers arrived in great numbers at Camp Kilmer. The *Wall Street Journal* aptly stated: 'US firms deluge Hungarian refugees with job proposals'.[71] The camp was transformed into a huge job market. Willingness to help was therefore connected to the anti-communist attitude of US society. Parts of it wished to show solidarity with the 'freedom fighters' by offering assistance. Moreover, the characteristics of the Hungarians arriving in the United States matched the needs of companies and communities around the country.[72] According to statistics obtained by the President's Committee, most of the Hungarians who travelled to the United States were young adults between eighteen and thirty-four years of age and they were skilled workers.[73] This age group was especially needed as workers in the United States.[74] The fact

[66] Philipp Ther, *Die Außenseiter. Flucht, Flüchtlinge und Integration im modernen Europa* (Berlin, 2017), p. 238.

[67] World Council of Churches Archives, Geneva, 425.3.078, country files, Austria 1955–7, news releases, 'Interchurch aid committee meeting in Geneva approves action in Hungary and Middle East, hears report from Indo-China', 12 Nov. 1956.

[68] NACP, Internal Affairs of Hungary, Assistant Secretary Robert C. Hall to Melvin Price, House of Representatives, 4 Feb. 1957; Niessen, 'Hungarian refugees', pp. 129–30.

[69] CCOH, oral history interview with Lajos and Kati Piros, 1979, p. 70.

[70] Porter, *Benevolent empire*, p. 155; Claudia Goldin, 'Labor markets in the twentieth century', in Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, eds., *The Cambridge economic history of the United States* (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 549–624.

[71] Apple, 'US firms'.

[72] Ibid. See also Emma Harrison, 'Refugee skills find US market', *New York Times*, 21 July 1957, p. 15.

[73] 'Lyford's general correspondence', file: 'Hungarian phase of RRP, "press kit" prepared at the President's Committee at Camp Kilmer, what a refugee is like' (hereafter 'Hungarian phase of RRP, "press kit"').

[74] Harrison, 'Refugee skills'.

that most of the people fleeing Hungary were young workers or intellectuals, in particular those under the age of twenty-five, who had grown up under communism, was a central characteristic of the Hungarian refugee crisis.[75] Roughly 71 per cent of the refugees were men, and there were therefore also more men than women who emigrated to the United States. In addition, their educational level was high, as the average Hungarian had an educational background of around nine years. Many of the refugees were people with a technical or university education. Finally, around 45 per cent of the Hungarians emigrating to the United States had relatives in the country, which facilitated their integration because these relatives were able to act as financial sponsors.[76]

Requests for qualified workers reached the authorities of the United States from around the country. For example, in December 1956, a professor at Montana State College asked the US embassy in Vienna if there were young mathematicians among the Hungarian refugees. He offered to find them jobs at colleges and universities in the Rocky Mountain area, where the departments of mathematics had vacancies.[77] An architect from Baytown, Texas, offered jobs as architects or architectural draftsmen, because the company was in 'urgent need of two additional permanent personnel in the office'.[78] Medical doctors were also wanted. The Colorado Chamber of Commerce asked explicitly if there were any doctors among the Hungarian refugees entering the United States. If so, they requested that they be placed 'in locations such as Springfield, Colorado', because the town was 'in need of another doctor'.[79] American industry perceived the Hungarian refugees as a 'pool of valuable scientific manpower'.[80] Companies such as IBM, American Can, Ford Motor, and Boeing Airplane placed recruiting officers with job offers directly in Camp Kilmer. 'If every one of the refugees were an engineer, we could find jobs for them in no time', noted the head of the US Department of Labor crew in the camp. Similarly, electricians, welders, miners, and carpenters had the possibility of working in the same fields as they had in Hungary.[81]

III

The resettlement of Hungarians was not an unmitigated success, however, especially when the experience of the refugees themselves is taken into account. Firstly, some refugees were disappointed about conditions in the refugee camps, especially those in Austria. The often harsh conditions in the

[75] Ibolya Murber, 'Österreich und die Ungarnflüchtlinge 1956', in *Jahrbuch für Mitteleuropäische Studien 2016/17* (Vienna, 2016), pp. 19–43, at p. 22; Wilhelm Schliessleder, 'Das Zahlenbild der ungarischen Flüchtlinge in Österreich', *Integration Bulletin International*, 5 (1957), pp. 148–57.

[76] 'Hungarian phase of RRP, "press kit"'.

[77] NACP, Internal Affairs of Hungary, Professor Hans Sagan, Montana State College, to the US Embassy, Vienna, Austria, 4 Dec. 1956.

[78] NACP, Internal Affairs of Hungary, Daniel Perkins, architect, United States Consulate, Vienna, Austria, 3 Dec. 1956.

[79] NACP, Internal Affairs of Hungary, Gordon Allott, United States Senate, to John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, 6 Feb. 1957.

[80] Quote in Apple, 'US firms'; see also Harrison, 'Refugee skills'.

[81] Apple, 'US firms'.

mostly makeshift and overcrowded camps did not correspond to the images of the West promoted by Radio Free Europe.[82] Hungarian refugees wanted to leave Austria as soon as possible and immigrate in particular to the United States. As Kati Piros highlighted, they 'decided to go to the United States because that was the furthest from the Russian Army'.[83] To get 'as far as possible from the Russians' was an important motive to emigrate to the United States.[84]

Secondly, due to a brief economic recession in mid-1957, many of the Hungarians who had found work in industry shortly after arriving at Camp Kilmer became unemployed again as layoffs began.[85] This, in turn, disillusioned many refugees about the supposedly unlimited opportunities in the West, and they started to consider returning to Hungary, particularly because repatriation was being supported by an amnesty programme offered by the Hungarian regime. The Hungarian authorities used those returning as a propaganda tool to stir up resentments against the West and to force the return of more Hungarians. One of the common narratives was that Hungarians were being exploited as a labour force in Western countries and that the West was hindering them from returning home. A common accusation was that the refugees were sold as slaves to work at mines or plantations.[86] The observer of the government of Hungary at the United Nations Refugee Fund Executive Committee pointed out that

> It often happened that unscrupulous individuals and organizations taking advantage of the difficult situation of the refugees, employed them on heavy manual work which was beyond their strength. It also had been reported that the authorities of some States were taking reprisals against those who wished to return to Hungary.[87]

A common forum for criticizing the resettlement of Hungarians as a labour force was the United Nations, where the accusations were backed by other communist-ruled countries. The Hungarian ambassador in Austria, moreover, criticized the supposed pressure placed on refugees by the government of the United States to prevent them from returning home as part of the Cold War politics against the Soviet Union.[88]

The efforts by the Hungarian regime to force the return of refugees as part of the amnesty programme were not a success.[89] But the prospect of many

[82] Andreas Gémes, *Austria and the 1956 Hungarian revolution: between solidarity and neutrality* (Pisa, 2008), pp. 72–4; 'Refugee centers scored by priest', *New York Times*, 20 Feb. 1957.

[83] CCOH, oral history interview with Lajos and Kati Piros, 1979, p. 60.

[84] John MacCormac, 'Refugees oppose Austria as home', *New York Times*, 19 Apr. 1957.

[85] Porter, *Benevolent empire*, p. 163.

[86] Gémes, *Austria*, pp. 90ff.

[87] The United Nations Office Geneva Library and Archive, UNREF Executive Committee, 4th session, Summary record of the 27th meeting, Palais des Nations, Geneva, 29 Jan. 1957, p. 24.

[88] Andreas Gémes, *'Wie zwei geschiedene Eheleute'. Österreich-ungarische Beziehungen in den 1950er Jahren* (Graz, 2010), p. 150.

[89] Niessen, 'Hungarian refugees', p. 132; Zahra, *Great departure*, pp. 21, 242.

Hungarian refugees returning home alarmed the US government, as it would be a huge propaganda loss for the Cold War policy of presenting the country as a safe and prosperous haven for anyone wishing to leave communism. This gave the refugees a kind of agency to connect their interests with the foreign policy interests of the United States.[90] Because of their 'power to return', the future of the refugees turned into a highly political topic for the US government.[91] The situation became critical for the United States when, in May 1957, Hungarian refugees went on a hunger strike to protest against the end of the emergency refugee programmes for Hungarians to emigrate to the United States. The statement of the protesting Hungarians in Austria declared, 'we Hungarians are prepared sooner to die of hunger than to continue to live in the uncertain conditions forced on us by the Americans', because 'our hope to find a new homeland there has been disappointed'.[92] But the conflict between the US administration and Congress about liberalization versus restriction of refugee emigration made the resettlement of more than 38,000 Hungarians to the US impossible, which forced refugees who wanted to come to the US to go to other countries.[93]

To counter possible returns to Hungary, the US government again relied on labour and therefore tried to find new job opportunities; because of the ongoing recession these were now mostly outside industry in areas such as agriculture and menial labour. Many refugees from educated middle-class backgrounds found themselves working below their education level.[94] This applied to Lajos Piros, who had been a lawyer in Hungary, but who in the United States worked in a bakery, on constructions sites, and later in a factory. He was prepared to 'take any kind of job' because he was 'willing to work'.[95] Those with intellectual professions, such as lawyers, had an especially hard time finding jobs at the same level as in Hungary and had to settle for positions below their former status, which frustrated them.[96] For example, a fifty-year-old lawyer was only able to find work as a janitor.[97] The difficulty of attaining a position of a similar level to that held in Hungary for refugees who worked in the humanities was also addressed to President Eisenhower. Andrew Vajda, a lawyer from Budapest, who, according to his own account, fought as a 'freedom fighter', complained that 'serious talents are getting lost here'. He referred to the high education level of lawyers, teachers, intellectuals, and journalists, which, in his opinion, was little appreciated in the United States, although the newspapers were regularly reporting on the

[90] The link between the personal refugee experience and the global Cold War is also highlighted by Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang in this special issue, pp. 000–000.

[91] For the politicization of 'return', see Laura Robson and Arie M. Dubnov's article in this special issue, pp. 000–000.

[92] 'Hungarians fast in exile pressed', *New York Times*, 10 May 1957, p. 8.

[93] Niessen, 'Hungarian refugees', p. 130.

[94] Murber, 'Österreich', p. 22.

[95] CCOH, oral history interview with Lajos and Kati Piros, 1979, p. 76.

[96] Harrison, 'Refugee skills'.

[97] Apple, 'US firms'.

shortage of scientists and teachers.[98] On the other hand, Kati Piros, Lajos Piros's wife, had no trouble finding a job through the National Academy of Sciences because of her medical and chemistry education. Soon after they arrived at Camp Kilmer, a representative of the National Academy of Sciences told the family that, 'they can't do anything with Lajos, but they can place me [Kati] somewhere'. She was given a position in the pharmacology department at Yale University.[99]

Although a larger proportion of those who emigrated were skilled men, most of the women who came to the United States had the same educational experience as men and therefore had a good chance of finding a job. The government's goal to get Hungarians out of the camps as quickly as possible thus helped them to get employed.[100] Moreover, even during the admission process in Austria the United States had favoured skilled men and women. 'First of all the United States took people with professions, like engineers, medical doctors, and people that had some kind of profession or ... not profession but ... some mechanical skill', as Kati Piros again highlights.[101] Fortunately for the US government, the recession in 1957 was short-lived and economic conditions quickly recovered, leading to an increased demand for labour again.[102] The government also encouraged other Western partners to take in as many Hungarians as possible to counter possible returns.[103]

As stated by the US government, integration of the refugees in the United States focused on assimilation of 'new Hungarian neighbors into the American community'.[104] A main way of presenting them was to show the 'ability of the refugees to adjust quietly to the American way of life'.[105] A media campaign was therefore launched by the Eisenhower administration, which stressed particular characteristics of the refugees – including marriage, family life, gender roles, employment, patterns of consumption, and the strong anti-communist attitude – which fitted with the image of 'America'.[106] By emphasizing the positive values of refugees and their benefits for the United States, the administration again wanted to counter criticism of the admission policy.[107] The government also reverted to traditional gender stereotypes, portraying women in the media as housewives, as the example of the '23-year-old heroine' who 'has become a model housewife' shows. In Hungary she 'killed five Russians', but in

[98] NACP, Internal Affairs of Hungary, Andrew Vajda to President Eisenhower, 3 May 1958.
[99] CCOH, oral history interview with Lajos and Kati Piros, 1979, p. 68.
[100] Porter, *Benevolent empire*, pp. 160–3.
[101] CCOH, oral history interview with Lajos and Kati Piros, 1979, p. 61.
[102] Porter, *Benevolent empire*, pp. 163–4.
[103] 'Hungarian phase of RRP, State Department's position'.
[104] 'Hungarian phase of RRP, outline'.
[105] 'Hungarian phase of RRP, "press kit"'.
[106] Harrison E. Salisbury, 'Hungarian refugees blend easily into U.S. way of life', *New York Times*, 24 Mar. 1957, p. 1.
[107] Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate*, p. 75; Pastor, 'American reception', p. 200; Niessen, 'Hungarian refugees', p. 129.

the United States she was now a perfect housewife, highly integrated into the local community, as the *New York Times* emphasized.[108]

For the US government, the reception of Hungarian refugees was, in the end, a success story, especially from an economic point of view.[109] In May 1957, the secretary of labor, James P. Mitchell, concluded that, through the acceptance of refugees, the United States 'received a valuable economic bonus'. Referring to a report of the National Academy of Sciences, he stated: 'the education of these Hungarian scientists, engineers and other university graduates represents an investment of over $30 million'.[110] Indeed, young and well-educated Hungarians mostly integrated successfully into the 'American way of life'.[111] And although former lawyers like Lajos Piros struggled to find a job in the beginning, according to an interview in 1979, he and his wife, Kati, never questioned their decision to emigrate to the United States. Rather, Kati pointed to the happy American life they enjoyed:

> This is what I call the American smell, and when that smell hits me I get back this old feeling that I am so happy that I am here, and I know the life will be better and better every day, and I have no more worries. It was a fantastic feeling. It was ups and downs, but in general it was a fantastic feeling.[112]

However, while most Hungarians, as well as the US media, presented the resettlement as a success story, not all parts of US society were similarly happy.[113] As Peter Gatrell has pointed out, the African American community accused the government of favouring Hungarian refugees and neglecting the rights of African Americans in the country, especially as they were also in need of jobs.[114] An African American correspondent from Philadelphia stated that the US government had 'a nerve to bring all the Hungarians over here and my people are begging for jobs, schooling and even in some places food'. She continued, 'I have seen some hire these displaced persons before hiring a qualified Negro.'[115] In addition to their skills, being perceived as 'white' was a reason why Hungarians were quickly integrated into the United States job market. Because of racial segregation, the newly admitted 'white' European Hungarians were hierarchically superior to African American citizens and therefore had better job opportunities. But this also highlights a stark change in US immigration policies because, after the First World War, the United States restricted immigration from eastern Europe to protect the

[108] '23-year-old heroine has become a model housewife', *New York Times*, 24 Mar. 1957, p. 1; Porter, *Benevolent empire*, p. 161.

[109] Niessen, 'Hungarian refugees', p. 134.

[110] James P. Mitchell, 'Freedom's $30 million bonus', *New York Herald Tribune*, 10 May 1957, found in Rutgers University Archives, Tracy Voorhees papers, newspaper clippings, 1957.

[111] Niessen, 'Hungarian refugees', p. 134; Pastor, 'American reception', pp. 201–4.

[112] CCOH, oral history interview with Lajos and Kati Piros, 1979, p. 77.

[113] Salisbury, 'Hungarian refugees', pp. 1, 36.

[114] Peter Gatrell, 'Putting refugees in their place', *New Global Studies*, 7 (2013), pp. 1–24, at p. 20.

[115] Quoted in ibid., p. 20.

'American racial stock'. Only after the Second World War were eastern Europeans now perceived as 'white'.[116] In this respect, the United States was part of a post-Second World War phenomenon. As Sebastian Huhn and Linda Erker have shown for Latin America and Ioannis Limnios-Sekeris for Australia, immigration policies in the 1940s and 1950s were highly influenced by questions of race and the protection of the 'whiteness' of the majority of society.[117] The Hungarian refugees fitted into the construction of a specific 'white refugee policy' that favoured Europeans over people from Africa or Asia, and even over African Americans.

IV

The resettlement of Hungarian refugees in the United States in 1956 is generally perceived as a success story, made possible by the dichotomy of the Cold War. Indeed, most of the refugees quickly integrated into American society, and the foreign policy interests of the United States put them in a favourable position. However, it should not be overlooked that, in addition to the political interests of the US government, the economic boom in the West in the 1950s, which meant companies were looking for skilled workers, played a major part in this rapid resettlement and integration into American society. The Hungarians fled as political refugees, but they emigrated to the United States as workers. This highlights the importance of integrating economic interests and labour demands into analyses of the reception and integration process of refugees, as Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang and Shuvatri Dasgupta have also shown in their articles.

Next to the 'usefulness' on the labour market was the racial background which favoured the integration of Hungarians into the United States. The fact that the new workers came from Europe and were perceived as 'white' benefited them over African American workers. This highlights the importance of the racial aspects of what Kerstin von Lingen and Milinda Banerjee have called the construction of the 'refugee political'. Hungarian refugees, US companies, and the US government all contributed towards the making of a 'white' refugee resettlement regime. In other words, it was a 'white refugee political' that was constructed in the United States. The consequence of this politics of 'usefulness' was that those who did not meet these criteria were left behind. Elderly or sick people, single women with children, and all those who did not fit the needs of the labour market were forced to stay in Austria, much to the discomfort of the Austrian government, which explicitly pushed for the resettlement of all Hungarians.

Finally, this case-study of Hungarian resettlement in the United States points to the importance of including 'refugee voices' in our analyses, as

[116] Zahara, *Great departure*, p. 195.

[117] Erker, 'Grete Mostny'; Huhn, 'Rethinking the postwar international migration regime'; Ioannis Limnios-Sekeris, 'Australia and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration: radical exclusion and ethnic discrimination in the era of universal human rights', in Lina Venturas, ed., *International 'migration management' in the early Cold War: the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration* (Corinth, 2010), pp. 191–216.

von Lingen and Banerjee have also emphasized in their introduction. The refugees themselves, their potential decision to return, and their protest in the refugee camps made it necessary for the US government to find a permanent solution in order to maintain a position of power in the Cold War. Integrating those fleeing communism for the West and the 'American way of life' was an important asset in winning the propaganda battle of the Cold War. The refugee policy of resettlement of Hungarians in the United States was therefore constructed in an area of conflict between Cold War interests, economic needs, questions of race, and the individual power of Hungarians to return.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Cite this article: Knoll S (2025). Hungarian Refugees in the United States between Cold War Politics, Economic Growth, and Labour Demands, 1956–1958. *The Historical Journal* 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X24000724