

## Postwar Refugee Movements and Canada

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Through much of Canada's history, from Confederation to the end of the Second World War, the national immigration policy had been one of exclusion. A largely xenophobic attitude was focused more towards keeping immigrants out of the country, unless they belonged to a handful of "preferred" types. While people from many countries did enter Canada at all points in its history, some had it harder than others. The twentieth century began to change all that. Through the Second World War and the early years of the Cold War, Canadian views on immigration shifted dramatically. In a mere dozen years after the end of the war, Canada transformed from a nation of closed doors to one that was beginning to open them. The twin crises of the WWII refugees and the refugees from the Hungarian Revolution brought a humanitarian character to Canadian immigration which had never before existed, heralding a reformed immigration policy as well as Canada's entry onto the postwar world stage.

The experiences of the Second World War and its aftermath dramatically changed Canadian perceptions towards foreigners and immigration. During the First World War, waves of extremist and bigoted thought gripped the nation, worsening attitudes already long deep-set against people from Central and Eastern Europe. Although this attitude continued into the Second World War – especially against the Japanese<sup>1</sup> – the fears of a "fifth column" of enemy agents were not as strong as they had been a generation before. In addition to this, immigrant communities already established in Canada had more sympathy from many Canadians due to their homelands' occupation by Axis forces. Overall, Canadians were beginning to be receptive to the notion of liberalizing immigration regulations long frozen in the new world of the late 1940s. However, the political stance on immigration was still very restrictive, due to a combination of closed-door policies from the Depression-era immigration freeze, remaining anti-foreigner sentiment from the early twentieth century, and the fear – made worse by Soviet power – of left-wing radicalism in Canada. From 1930 to 1945, it was almost impossible to enter Canada.<sup>2</sup> The weight of these roadblocks would make them hard to move for some time, although events in Europe had begun to shift them.

For six years between 1939 and 1945, much of Europe was the battleground upon which the Second World War had been fought. By war's end, Nazi Germany had been defeated, and much of Europe had – to one extent or another – been liberated. However, the Europe of 1945 was far different from the Europe of the 1920s and 1930s. For starters, the entire continent had been devastated by the war. Europe, from the Pyrenees to Moscow, had been fought over inch by inch, usually at least twice, by the opposing armies. The political map had been changed well: borders had been redrawn, and half the continent had merely traded one occupation for another as the Soviet Union

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<sup>1</sup> Ward, W. Peter, *The Japanese in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association [CHA], 1982), 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Burnet, Jean R. and Howard Palmer, *"Coming Canadians": An Introduction to a History of Canada's Peoples* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1988), 40 provides an example of this: between 1920 and 1930, 1,369,026 immigrants entered Canada, whereas less than a fifth of that had arrived over the following fifteen years.

consolidated control of the east. As a result of the war and its aftermath, the population of Europe was reduced to living among what remained of their former towns and cities, trying to survive in conditions so poor that cigarettes had become the *de facto* currency of the continent.<sup>3</sup>

These conditions were not survivable. Millions of refugees began to roam across Europe in search of food, shelter, or any scrap of hope, and eventually began to be concentrated in refugee camps across the continent. The refugees were soon given the euphemistic title of “displaced persons,” abbreviated to “DPs” by most people. In the general process of rebuilding Europe after the war, most of the Allied nations found themselves trying to cope with the problem of dealing with nearly ten million refugees in need of assistance. Many were quickly reintegrated into their societies, but within a year of the war’s end there were still over one million DPs languishing in the camps, seeking a home.<sup>4</sup> The Allied nations best able to cope with the mass of refugees – Canada, Australia and the United States – found the question of what to do about it sitting in their laps.

The wartime experience did not eliminate anti-immigration sentiment in Canada, but it did blunt it enough to make Canadians more receptive to the idea in general. Between the events of the war itself, the Holocaust, the subsequent Soviet occupation and beginning of the Cold War, and the awareness raised by immigrant communities in Canada, and a sense of guilt and distaste at policies uncomfortably close to those of the regimes Canadians had just helped to defeat, Ottawa was becoming more receptive to the refugee situation in Europe than it had ever been before.

The process of dealing with the DPs and postwar immigration in general was set into motion fairly quickly. The United Nations was beginning to address the refugee problem even before the end of the war, and in Canada numerous aid societies dedicated to individual countries and groups – the Canadian Society for German Relief, the Finland Aid Society Fund, the Polish Canadian Congress, and others – were already establishing community-level structures for dealing with the expected flood of immigrants and refugees. Pressure from businesses and even organized labor, riding the optimism of the early postwar era, urged Ottawa to streamline the immigration process. Finally, Parliament got involved, and public hearings and a Senate committee began to urge a “sustained policy of immigration” based on the “absorptive capacity” – the rate at which immigrants could be integrated without disruption – of Canadian economy and society.<sup>5</sup>

Prime Minister Mackenzie King was largely opposed to the idea of immigration as a fundamental right. However, by war’s end he had begun to acknowledge the notion that immigration could be supported for humanitarian reasons. To this end, in June of 1947 he set into motion a program to allow large numbers of DPs to settle in Canada,

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, Michael, ed., The World at Arms: The Reader’s Digest Illustrated History of World War II (London: The Reader’s Digest Association, 1989), 451-452.

<sup>4</sup> Knowles, Valerie, Strangers At Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540-1997 (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1997), 126-127.

<sup>5</sup> Whitaker, Reg, Canadian Immigration Policy Since Confederation (Ottawa: CHA, 1991), 14.

beginning with a first movement of five thousand (non-sponsored!) refugees. There were problems with the new policy – for instance, King was rigid in his opposition of “large-scale immigration from the Orient” – and the prime minister stressed that entering Canada would remain a privilege, and not a fundamental right. On the other hand, the new policy supported a continuous, large-scale influx of immigrants for the first time in years. While selective – the government still essentially picked and chose who would enter and who wouldn’t, and many of the immigrants were still shunted off to natural-resource industries – the acceptance of DPs would still work at the highest rate Canada could comfortably handle.<sup>6</sup> Between 1946 and 1952, Canada managed to accept some two hundred thousand DPs. Most of these refugees were from Eastern Europe, including 39,000 Poles,<sup>7</sup> 32,000 Ukrainians,<sup>8</sup> 12,000 Hungarians,<sup>9</sup> and similarly large numbers of people from other countries around Europe. More conventional immigration occurred around the same time, and over the whole eight years of this early postwar period some eight hundred thousand new Canadians arrived in the country.<sup>10</sup>

The acceptance of the DPs into Canadian society was the first of the large-scale humanitarian movements the country took part in after the war. It went quite smoothly – moreso than most expected – and heralded a number of other changes in the time’s immigration policies. For instance, French immigrants were finally given equal precedence to American and British immigrants for the first time, and the Canadian Citizenship Act of 1946 finally created a notion of *Canadian* citizenship, distinct from the status of a British subject.<sup>11</sup>

The DP movement was both a symptom and a cause of a general loosening of immigration restrictions after the war. Orders-in-council as early as May 1946 began allowing Canadians to sponsor relatives more distant than the immediate family; around the same time, some seven thousand soldiers from the Polish Free Army were allowed to settle in Canada when they refused to return to a Poland occupied by the Red Army.<sup>12</sup>

By the time the DP movement began to peter out, Canadians had established to themselves that they were a country able and willing to welcome refugees with open arms. The European refugees were a precedent for allowing groups of people in dire straits to enter the country more easily. By 1950, the presence of the Cold War suddenly meant that there were many more groups of people who would be seen by Canadians as being in these dire straits. By the mid-1950s, Canadians would have their first test at handling population movements in the new world.

The tremendous refugee crises after the war had forced Canada to reexamine its immigration laws, which for the first half of the twentieth century had been strict, arbitrary and racist. The influx of two hundred thousand DPs from the refugee camps

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Avery, D. H. and J. K. Fedorowicz, The Poles in Canada (Ottawa: CHA, 1982), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Gerus, O.W. and J.E. Rea, The Ukrainians in Canada (Ottawa: CHA, 1991), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Patrias, Carmela, The Hungarians in Canada (Ottawa: CHA, 1999), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Burnet, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Whitaker, 14-15.

<sup>12</sup> Knowles, 130.

across Europe, and the conditions which they fled, affected Canadian citizens profoundly. The idea of a closed-door policy began to seem less appealing as optimism from the postwar era encountered the growing sense of humanitarian responsibility Canadians felt towards refugees. These two ideas – that immigration didn't necessarily hurt, and that it was a good time to try and admit refugees on their own count as opposed to considering them immigrants – were beginning to take hold of the Canadian psyche just in time for the Hungarian crisis of 1956.

The postwar experience had caused an overall shift in Canadian immigration policies, and the Immigration Act of 1952 was an example of the country's new direction. The 1952 Act, however, was more a reaction against new immigration patterns set in place by a still-isolationist country than it was an attempt to ease immigration along. The new law placed unprecedented powers of discretion in the hands of the Minister of Immigration and his officials, listed twenty-four(!) categories of inadmissible immigrants, and refused any right of appeal to immigrants who were turned away from the country.<sup>13</sup> Even a brief look at the Immigration Act would show that it was a law intended to exclude; just one clause of the Act forbids

Persons who are *or have been, at any time before or after the commencement of this Act, members of or associated with any organization, group or body of any kind concerning which there are reasonable grounds for believing that it promotes or advocates or at the time of such membership or association promoted or advocated subversion, by force or other means of democratic government, institutions or processes, as they are understood in Canada, except persons who satisfy the Minister that they have ceased to be members of or associated with such organizations, groups or bodies and whose admission would not be detrimental to the security of Canada;*<sup>14</sup>

The law also allowed the government to unilaterally prohibit admission of other groups or individuals, based on ethnicity, class, geographical area of origin(!), customs, climatic experience(!), and so on.<sup>15</sup> These restrictions were ostensibly to screen for people who wouldn't be able to "handle" life in Canada for physical reasons, but were more intended as a *carte blanche* for immigration officials to forbid visible minorities – not explicitly mentioned in the Act – from the country. Despite pressure from the United Nations, the bill did not recognize refugees as an immigration category in and of themselves, instead subjecting them to the same exhaustive list of restrictions as other immigrants.<sup>16</sup>

On the surface, the Act was a highly exclusionist law, designed to maintain a kind of cultural "purity." In the eyes of modern Canadians, it is more flaw than law. However, the Act also established an environment in which the Minister of Immigration could get involved in every aspect of the immigration process, from the grand sweeps of national policy to the smallest minutiae of individual immigrants. While this tended to swamp the Minister and his officials, it also essentially allowed them to ignore the very provisions of

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<sup>13</sup> Whitaker, 17.

<sup>14</sup> 1952 *Immigration Act*, Part I, 5(1). Emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> Hawkins, Freda, *Canada and Immigration: Public Policy and Public Concern*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1988), 102.

<sup>16</sup> Keyserlingk, Robert H, ed., *Breaking Ground: The 1956 Hungarian Refugee Movement to Canada* (Toronto: York Lanes Press, 1996), ix.

the Act which gave them their powers in order to get something done, whether it be providing loans to immigrants in poor financial straits, using ministerial permits to allow someone into Canada by fiat, and so on.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the spirit of the law was killed by its letter. While the officials granted power by the Act were beginning to get used to their sweeping authority, events in Europe were giving them the opportunity to try their newfound power out.

The Cold War was beginning to heat up in Europe. A number of challenges to Soviet power in the eastern half of the continent were being made more and more vehemently, and people had begun to take to the streets in many countries living under the aegis of the Warsaw Pact. In February of 1956, a brief attempt at revolution in Poland fell apart, although it did earn the people concessions. The real challenge to Soviet power, however, came in October 1956, when the Hungarian population ousted the Soviet-installed government and began enacting their own policies. The revolution seemed poised to succeed, until the start of November when the new Hungarian government withdrew from the Warsaw Pact. This was too much for Moscow, and armed Soviet intervention resulted. On November 4, Soviet forces invaded Hungary and quickly crushed the revolt. Amidst the reprisals and the chaos of the fighting itself, almost a quarter-million refugees began to flee the country. Most had nowhere to go, and the refugees began to concentrate in Austrian refugee camps by the thousands.

The movement of at least 200,000 refugees in a twelve-week period was the largest wave of refugees since the end of the Second World War nine years earlier. Relief agencies were absolutely overwhelmed, and called upon the rest of the world to provide some kind of assistance. Ironically, Canada's draconian and exclusionist Immigration Act put it in just the right place to do so. As much as the western countries wanted to help with the crisis in Hungary itself, they could not do so without risking open war with the Soviet Union. At the same time popular opinion in NATO was hurting from the fiasco of the Anglo-French intervention in the Suez crisis. With western countries unable to directly intervene, and many of them more focused on other diplomatic affairs, about the best anyone could hope for would be a generous policy towards assisting the refugees who escaped Hungary. Canada's immigration minister, the devoutly liberal J.W. Pickersgill, was in the best position to do so, and threw himself and his office into assisting the refugees with the powers granted his office in 1952.<sup>18</sup>

Within forty-eight hours of the Soviet intervention, Canadian immigration officers in Vienna were being ordered to give priority to Hungarian refugees. This allowed the refugees to be processed far more quickly than they otherwise would have been, but two other problems arose – first, many of the refugees had little more than the clothes on their backs, and there was not nearly enough transportation to get the thousands of refugees to Canada before the winter snows hit. The other obstacles to immigration – medical concerns, political leanings, and the simple fact that the Hungarians were still seen as “non-preferred” immigrants due to the Soviet domination of their lands, among other problems – were literally written off by Pickersgill and his officials as unnecessary

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid; Knowles, 137-138.

<sup>18</sup> Pickersgill's own story of how he handled the refugee crisis is available in Keyserlingk, 47-51.

concerns for the time being. About the only concern left in place was medical screening, although even that was reduced to a cursory examination rather than the comprehensive ones typically required.<sup>19</sup> For getting refugees to Canada, Pickersgill used a characteristic lack of subtlety by commandeering every seat he could on Canadian airlines and ships to speed up the flow.

By the end of November the speed at which the refugees flowed was beginning to flag, despite the fact that many were still awaiting transit. Thousands were waiting in Europe, wanting to come to Canada but afraid of being placed deep in debt on transportation costs, and other European countries were hesitant to admit additional refugees across their own borders. The minister, on the 28<sup>th</sup>, made the unprecedented suggestion of simply giving free passage to all the refugees who had applied to enter Canada. “There was no way to calculate the cost: it would depend on the number who came. We would take them all and [Ottawa] would pay the bill,” Pickersgill said of the proposal later.<sup>20</sup> Walter Harris, the horrified Minister of Finance, eventually signed on to the proposal, and things went ahead. It would be discovered later that Canada spent more per capita on handling the Hungarian refugee crisis than any other country in the world.

As global attention shifted from Hungary towards the still-explosive Suez crisis, Pickersgill took matters even more into his own hands to make sure the processing continued. Traveling to Vienna to manage affairs on the ground in person, he used the same ad-hoc approach which had been working in Ottawa to free up space and officials for the Hungarians, commandeering dance halls to create temporary immigration sheds, restoring old DP camps to livable conditions, and establishing exchange programs between Hungarian students and Canadian colleges. (Accepting students was not standard practice in most countries’ immigration policies at the time; the preference was for people who could *immediately* enter the job sector, not those who would have work to do for awhile first.)<sup>21</sup>

At home, Canadian communities responded beautifully to the refugees. Thirteen thousand families accepted refugees into their homes during the height of the movement as people began to settle across the country,<sup>22</sup> and most objections to the refugees’ entry into Canada were both quiet and few. The “fifty-sixers,” as they came to be known, were romanticized by many Canadians, who admired this small country’s defiance of the Soviet Union. Organizations such as the Hungarian-Canadian Federation organized the integration of the refugees into Canadian society with the help of the Red Cross and numerous other groups as well.<sup>23</sup>

Eventually, the migration began to slow down. By the summer of 1957, the Hungarian movement consisted mostly of sponsored, rather than subsidized, cases,<sup>24</sup> and

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<sup>19</sup> Hawkins, 114-115.

<sup>20</sup> Keyserlingk, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>22</sup> Patrias, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Dreisziger, N.F., Struggle and Hope: The Hungarian-Canadian Experience (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1982), 203-207.

<sup>24</sup> Hawkins, 116.

a new Conservative government under Prime Minister Diefenbaker began to roll back sponsorship programs as it turned back towards more domestic concerns. Deprived of both support and leadership, a new direction of immigration briefly inspired by the refugees – a smooth working of federal, provincial and municipal governments, with heavy involvement by the community, commerce sector, and academia – was permitted to slip away.<sup>25</sup> By the time it had, however, 37,500 Hungarians had been permitted into Canada. By 1958, fewer than a thousand of them were still having difficulties with their new lives, a certain proof of their success integrating into their new country.<sup>26</sup> Other refugee movements would occur over the next generation, but none on so dramatic a scale.

The Hungarian crisis was an affair that might not have worked under different circumstances. Had the Immigration Act of 1952, draconian as it was, not been on the books, then Pickersgill would not have had the powers necessary to get the refugee flow moving. The revolution's proximity to the DP movements of the late 1940s was fortunate as well; Canadians had been responsive to that wave of refugees, but were beginning to return to isolationism when the crisis in Hungary broke. The handling of the crisis was for the most part an incredible success, as Canada took in fully one in five of the refugees with next to no difficulty.

The thirteen years since the end of the Second World War changed Canada's views on immigration almost as dramatically as the war changed Canada itself. The country entered the postwar period as an isolationist country with no real wish to change, using its closed-door policies to try and preserve itself in the face of a shifting world. However, the two great crisis movements of the early postwar period brought that world to Canada while Canada was not quite willing to go to it. The DP movement, and the Hungarian refugee crisis which followed, both came and went. The DPs were welcomed, and then the Immigration Act was written into law; the Hungarians were welcomed, and then the door was narrowed even if it was not altogether closed. However, aspects of each movement remained for years after they had passed. Both movements created a more humanitarian nature to Canada's immigration policies than had ever existed before, and both movements helped to create a sense of pride in Canadians for doing something concrete to help out a quarter million people. On top of that basic fact, Canada had brought itself to the attention of the global community as well. Canada's effective and large-scale handling of the postwar refugees coupled with its dramatic actions to help the Hungarians were being noticed by the international scene at the same time as Lester Pearson's involvement in cooling off the Suez Crisis in Egypt was taking form. With these and other deeds happening around the same time, Canada had quietly announced its arrival as a mature middle power in the world.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 116-117.

<sup>26</sup> Patrias, 23-24.