

The resettlement of Hungarian refugees in 1956

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Around the 60th anniversary of the Hungarian uprising it is worth looking back on the efforts to resettle refugees to see that debates about how to help are timeless.

During the suppression of the uprising that took place in Hungary in October 1956, some 180,000 Hungarians fled to Austria and another 20,000 to Yugoslavia. The response to those who fled is considered one of the most successful demonstrations of international solidarity to find solutions to forced migration: nearly 180,000 Hungarians were resettled to 37 countries within three years.

Hungary had erected a so-called Iron Curtain along the border with Austria at the end of 1949, a deadly system of barbed-wire fences, watchtowers and landmines intended – at the start of the Cold War – to prevent Hungarian citizens fleeing to the West. Then between May and October of 1956, the physical border and minefield were largely dismantled by Hungary. The Hungarian uprising and the flight of Hungarians to Austria began within the next few days.

Austria showed openness and willingness to welcome the refugees, noting their *prima facie* status under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Concerned for his government's ability to handle the vast number of people suddenly arriving in Austria, Interior Minister Oskar Helmer quickly appealed to the United Nations and specific countries for assistance.

On 5th November, Helmer sent a telegram to the newly established UN Refugee

Agency, UNHCR, and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (now the International Organization for Migration) specifically requesting financial support for Austria and expressing his hope that most of the refugees could soon be relocated to third countries:

FURTHERMORE EARLY TEMPORARY ACCEPTANCE OF AS GREAT A NUMBER AS POSSIBLE OF THESE REFUGEES BY EUROPEAN STATES IS URGENTLY REQUESTED STOP¹ THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT APPEALS TO THE FEELINGS OF SOLIDARITY IN HELPING REFUGEES WHICH HAS SO OFTEN BEEN EVIDENCED IN THE PAST

On the same day UNHCR sent an appeal to the 20 member states of the UN Refugee Fund Executive Committee stressing the importance of showing solidarity to the refugees and to Austria:

IN OUR AND AUSTRIAN GOVERNMENTS OPINION EXTREMELY EFFECTIVE HELP WOULD ALSO BE PROVIDED IF GOVERNMENTS SYMPATHETIC TO THE TRIALS OF HUNGARIAN PEOPLE WOULD AGREE TO GIVE AT LEAST TEMPORARY ASYLUM TO GREATEST POSSIBLE NUMBER

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OF REFUGEES STOP YOUR GOVERNMENT IS THEREFORE URGENTLY REQUESTED TO GIVE CONSIDERATION TO THIS POSSIBILITY IN ADDITION TO FINANCIAL AID FOR THESE REFUGEES STOP SERVICES OF THIS OFFICE ARE AVAILABLE TO ASSIST IN SELECTION

The UN General Assembly – otherwise occupied with the Suez Canal crisis happening concurrently – also called for help but did not mention the resettlement of refugees specifically until 21st November. Appeals for assistance continued through November from the Austrian representative to the UN, through additional direct appeals via telegram by the UN Secretary-General and UNHCR, and through Resolutions in the UN General Assembly.

As early as 7th November, the French Red Cross flew a plane loaded with medical supplies to the Austrian capital Vienna and brought refugees back on the return flight. On 8th November, the first of many trains moved more than 400 refugees to Switzerland. Buses from Sweden and additional trains from Belgium and the Netherlands transported refugees on 9th November. By 28th November, a total of nine European countries had already resettled 21,669 refugees; by 31st December, 92,950 had been transported out of Austria. In total, 37 countries around the world resettled nearly 180,000 Hungarians.

Sweden was one of the first countries to respond to the call for solidarity, resettling Hungarian refugees from Austria just days after the uprising began. Sweden also had national politicians

campaigning in the UN system, urging other states to take more refugees, including the ‘harder’ cases. Norway, on the other hand, chose to watch, wait and see how the situation evolved on the ground before committing more than financial assistance to Austria.

Sweden

By 6th November, the decision to resettle Hungarian refugees was made by Sweden’s Minister of Aid and Immigration, Ulla Lindström. On the following day, camps in Austria were contacted to coordinate selection, and a Swedish delegation was sent. The Labour Board began planning the selection process as well as the process for reception of those resettled. On 12th November, 73 children and 30



Hungarian refugees in Austria taking a train to Switzerland, their new country of asylum, in 1956.

mothers went via train from Vienna to Malmö; on the following day, busloads of Hungarian men headed towards Sweden.

On 15th November, a new request for a larger quota came from UNHCR. Support from the public and newspapers also argued for a larger number of refugees to come to Sweden and on 21st November it was decided that another 2,000 should be resettled. Quotas were further increased on 7th December and 8th February 1957.

Interestingly, on 23rd November, Minister Lindström spoke to the UN about Sweden's refugee policy on the Hungarians, noting how it can be especially beneficial to take in the old and the sick. She noted that there should be motivation by all states to help with the harder cases as well as the need for Sweden to take in those who could easily be integrated into the labour market. "The best thing to give a resettled refugee", she argued, "would be a chance – and a job." By the end of 1958, more than 7,300 Hungarians were resettled to Sweden.

Norway

Norway was slower to allow resettlement compared with other countries, and preferred to wait and see if the situation evolved. Three days after the Soviet invasion, on 27th October, 70,000 Norwegian Krone was allocated for emergency relief for Hungarian refugees who had begun to appear in Austria. Through the first week of November, reports requested by the government from its permanent delegate in Geneva argued that the situation on the ground was still unclear; it was thought that the majority of refugees wanted to stay close to Hungary in the hope of eventual return. Despite acknowledging requests from UNHCR and the Austrian government to directly resettle refugees – and despite growing public opinion in Norway supporting the refugee cause – the government was advised to offer only financial assistance for the refugees where they were, in Austria.

Debates in the Norwegian parliament on 16th and 26th November revolved around how much funding to allocate to the refugee situation. All but one member of

parliament urged caution and restraint while waiting to see how the situation unfolded. After another direct appeal from UNHCR for resettlement, a debate on 30th November acknowledged the need to strike a balance between helping people in Austria and resettling them to Norway.

During a meeting on 6th December between the Ministry of Social Affairs and the newly established Board for the Resettlement of Hungarian Refugees to Norway, it was noted that Sweden was taking in 100-130 refugees a day, and it was hoped to bring 100 refugees to Norway by late December. By 13th December 1956, the first transport of Hungarians to Norway arrived. By the end of 1957, nearly 1,500 Hungarians had been resettled to Norway, including tuberculosis patients and their families.

The internal debates in Sweden and Norway in 1956 parallel those in 2015, when countries in Europe were attempting to respond to a sudden influx of refugees and asylum seekers. Sweden's reaction in 2015 echoed the speed of its response in 1956: along with Germany, it was one of the first and only European countries to let refugees and asylum seekers in before eventually pausing to question whether they had the capacity. Norway, by contrast, first held a large domestic debate pitting the merits of increasing the annual quota with specific spots allocated for Syrians against simply donating money to countries neighbouring Syria hosting large refugee camps, before deciding both to increase their resettlement quota and to donate money to the region.

As the experiences of Sweden and Norway demonstrate, the years may pass but domestic debates about solidarity and how best to respond to flows of refugees and asylum seekers appear to remain constant.

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1. 'STOP' was frequently used in telegrams at the end of sentences (in preference to a dot, which was anyway charged as a full word) to avoid messages being misunderstood. Telegrams were always composed and printed in CAPITAL LETTERS.