

# The Migration of Hungarian Refugees to Prince Edward Island, Canada (1956-1957) – A Communicative Inquiry With a Local Newspaper

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**Abstract:** This article describes how local media in the smallest province of Canada socially constructed the arrival of Hungarian refugees on Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada from 1956-1957. This article addresses the role which the media has in the social construction of refugees, as well as sheds light on the niche topic of refugee migration to Prince Edward Island in the late 1950s. From an analysis of newspaper articles from *The Guardian* (PEI) it was found that during 1956-1957 Hungarian refugees were positively received on Prince Edward Island because they were anti-soviet political symbols. This political factor, coupled with their perceived ability to contribute to the Island's economy, encouraged their positive reception. The article argues that using newspapers as a primary source in a historical study of immigration can uncover both explicit and implicit attitudes with regards to communication, culture, and society.

**Keywords:** refugee studies, political migration, media representations, Cold War, Canada, Hungary

## A Revolt of the Mind

In 1953 a “revolt of the mind” was occurring in Hungary (Hidas, 1998, par 5). University students were rallying behind democratists who were challenging the Soviet status quo and calling for a government overthrow. By October of 1956, pro-democracy and anti-Soviet demonstrations were becoming increasingly intense. The Soviet government began to quash protesters with the use of violence, persecution and legislation which limited citizens' freedoms. An outmigration of 200,000 people from Hungary to Austria ensued, continuing throughout 1956 and 1957 (Dreisziger, 1985, p. 199).

Unlike the instances of out-migration that had occurred earlier in Hungary's history, the exodus of 1956-1957 was of people from all classes and occupations (Dreisziger, 1985, p.199). The North American Treaty Organization (NATO) was not willing to intervene as it

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feared that this would only promote conflict with the USSR (Thompson & Bangarth, 2008, p.295). However, as Andrew Thompson and Stephanie Bangarth write, nevertheless “Canadian immigration officials reinforced the number of immigration officers at the Canadian Embassy in Vienna, loosened the normal requirements concerning proper travel documentation, medical exams, and security clearances, and enlisted commercial airplanes to transport ... refugees out of Austria [and on to Canada]” as a way to offer support (Thompson & Bangarth, 2008, p.295). Throughout Canada the impending arrival of Hungarian refugees captivated the media. Headlines across the country were focused on the crisis in Hungary, and the immigration of Hungarians which was soon to occur. This article describes how the local newspaper *The Guardian* of the smallest province of Canada socially constructed the arrival of Hungarian refugees on Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada from 1956-1957.

## **Newspapers and Communication**

Newspapers can be an effective source to determine the reactions of an immigrant-receiving community to refugees and other newcomers. Newspapers are the communicators of “current history” (Leggit, 1938, p. 296). Newspapers are “both an integral part of the ideological apparatus of capitalist societies and one of the main agencies for the reproduction of these societies through their interpretation, packaging, and distribution of reality throughout society” (Franzosi, 1987, p. 6). What is presented in newspapers is not randomly selected. Newspaper content reflects the “will ... and interests of dominant economic groups” (Franzosi, 1987, p. 6). Akwa (2004) writes that the media is an integral part of our environment which affects our thoughts and behaviours (p.86). In addition, geographic or temporal restraints may determine that newspapers are the only available sources of data.

Some scholars write that newspaper reporting is biased, and therefore the reliability of the data is forfeited. Further, messages in the newspaper are interpreted differently from individual to individual so to determine the effect media messages have on public perception is difficult. When analyzing papers, the researcher is sometimes examining newspaper reporting as opposed to historical events. The researcher has to be aware of this reality and thus examine collections of articles as opposed to individual sets when attempting to construct a historical narrative. Doing so allows one to determine recursive themes in the newspaper and thus what issues are important or newsworthy to the dominant groups in society. (Hussain, 2000, p. 101).

## **Newspaper Data**

This article was developed from an analysis of articles published from 1956 to 1957 in Prince Edward Island’s (PEI) *The Guardian* newspaper. The articles were retrieved by manually searching through the Robertson Library’s newspaper microfiche archive collections at the University of PEI in Charlottetown, PEI. Articles which focused on Hungarian refugees were identified by scanning all of the headlines for keywords associated with the migration between 1956 and 1957 (such as, ‘Hungary’; ‘refugee’; ‘Red Cross’; ‘arrival’; ‘immigrants’; etc.) Indeed, it is likely that due to human error there were articles overlooked which could have been included. However, since this is a case study and the articles which were retrieved have been triangulated by a comparison with secondary literature, the threshold has been met for an exploratory discussion on this topic. The limitations are that this discussion is not generalizable without further research. Yet, the importance of this article is that it provides a

starting point for future research on Hungarian immigration to a small Canadian island-province during an important moment in the world history.

*The Guardian* was chosen because it was, and still is, the primary source for the Island's local news from all parts of the province. During the 1950s there were no other major newspaper outlets, and *The Guardian* would have provided a comprehensive overview of the political, social, and cultural happenings in the province. Based on these newspaper stories, this article attempts to develop a snapshot which provides detail and context of the arrival of Hungarian refugees on PEI, Canada from 1956-1957.

### **Hungarian Refugees – Push Factors and the Canadian Government's Response**

The response by the Canadian government to charter flights to Canada for more than 37,000 Hungarian refugees in 1956 can be attributed to the advocacy of church groups and other voluntary organizations (Dirks, 1993, p.9). There was a lot of dissatisfaction among groups such as the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC) that the Canadian government was not doing enough to assist the plight of the 200,000 Hungarian refugees in Austria (see Slack, 1986). Church groups successfully pressured the Canadian government to provide a robust response to the Hungarian crisis.

The CCC worked closely with the government through meetings in Ottawa to co-ordinate governmental and non-governmental settlement assistance for the Hungarian refugees. Canadians supported the advocacy of these volunteer groups. Newspapers across the country paid close attention to the situation in Austria. As a result, Canadians, being "responsible participant[s] in world affairs" (Dirks, 1993, p.11) at the time, reacted to this coverage and gave their full support to accommodating the Hungarian refugees.

The federal government's positive response to accepting the Hungarian refugees can be attributed to the pro-active efforts of voluntary organizations and to the idea that the Hungarian refugees were the right type of immigrant (Knowles, 1997, p. 126 & p. 128). Thompson and Bangarth write that, "accepting large numbers of refugees advanced the larger ideological, economic, and racial interests of the country" (Thompson & Bangarth, 2008, p. 310). By accepting large numbers of persons who had opposed the Soviets, the Canadian government was reaffirming its own democratic values. The Hungarian refugees, as long as they were young and healthy, were able to gain employment and contribute to the economy and society.

At the national level, Canada's economy was booming. Realizing this, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration J.W. Pickersgill used the Hungarian crisis as a way to solve the country's labour shortage. Historians have noted that the migration of Hungarians to Canada marked the beginning of a more open-door attitude towards refugees (Knowles, 1997, p. 126) and an end to Canada's European-focused refugee policy. (Adelman, 1993, p. 32). In 1956, Hungarian migration to Canada was the largest influx of refugees since the end of World War Two. The Minister's policy with regards to the Hungarian migration thus marks a seminal moment in Canada's immigration history.

## From the Newspaper: Prince Edward Island Receives Hungarian Refugees, 1956



*The Guardian* 1957, February 28

a massive transformation, causing concern for many residents. It is for this reason then, that Islanders may have been wary that the Hungarians would only further strain the Island's economy which was primarily based on the agricultural industry and was in flux. The turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the beginning of a wave of out-migration of people from the Island. This out-migration continued to strain the Island's economy throughout the 1950s and left fewer and fewer people to work as farm labourers (Armsworthy, 2005, p.2). During the 1950s, compared to Ontario and the Western provinces, the Island's economy was lagging behind. Increasingly, Prince Edward Island was turning to the federal government for payments to make up for the agricultural industry which was in decline. Thus, it is likely that those articles which touted the Hungarian's as being the right "stock" were implicitly *reassuring* residents that the Hungarians would not further strain the province's meagre economy.

On December 10, 1956, Minister of Health and Chairman of the Prince Edward Island Emergency Relief Committee, M.L. Bonnell announced that a refugee centre had been established in Falconwood, PEI ("To use treatment centre as refugees clearing house", 1956, p. 2). Bonnell had no idea of the number of refugees that would be arriving on the Island. The PEI Department of Health was going to provide medical examinations for the refugees at Falconwood. However, it is clear that Bonnell was adamant that the government could not accommodate all of the refugees' needs. He called upon doctors and nurses to volunteer, and charitable organizations to provide blankets, clothing, food, and other items. Persons who could offer accommodation in their homes or translation services were also called upon.

*The Guardian* newspaper provided excellent coverage of the Hungarian's arrival in the small province, which then had a population of only 99,285. As Canadians at the time were "overcome with compassion for the liberty-seeking Hungarians" (Knowles, 1997, p. 140), the newspaper coverage mirrored public opinion. *The Guardian* articles demonstrate that Islanders were in-synch with the national pro-humanitarian movement. Islanders assisted the Hungarians because they believed that by doing so, they were participating in a pro-democracy movement. However, some apprehension with regards to the Hungarian newcomer's potential impacts on the Island's economy existed among residents of the province. During the 1950s, the agricultural industry was undergoing

Bonnell specifically called upon the Women's Institute and the Catholic Women's League for their services. It is likely that these two organizations would have had a key role in accommodating refugees. Women's organizations were particularly a focus of calls for help. The state seemed to rely upon them in times of crisis. These organizations would have already had a history of being involved in charity and philanthropy on Prince Edward Island and were thus prepared. Islanders would have been familiar with organizations such as the Institute and it would not have been seen as odd that this organization would be involved in this type of charity. With the support of a locally-respected organization such as the Institute, Islanders may have then been more eager and less apprehensive to offer their own support.

The Red Cross on the Island also played an important role in assisting refugees. However, the Red Cross's role was regional, national, and transnational as opposed to the purely local role of the Institute. In a January 28, 1957 *Guardian* article, although the monetary target of the fund for the Hungarians still had not been achieved, the contributions Islanders made to the Red Cross's Hungarian Relief Fund were written about with pride. ("Red Cross says Hungarian fund is still short", 1957, p.2). The author writes that the Canadian Hungarian Relief Fund had been created to support the Hungarians who were living in refugee centres in Austria. Through organizations such as the Red Cross, Islanders went beyond their provincial and national borders to provide relief for Hungarian refugees abroad. Through assisting refugees abroad (and at home), Islanders were creating a positive representation of themselves. Islanders' actions as written about in *The Guardian* contribute to a picture of an Island that was welcoming and philanthropic. Representing themselves as good Samaritans may have been as important as reaffirming democratic and Christian values when considering to accommodate the refugees.

An article published on February 02, 1957 illustrates the response to the Hungarian crisis that was occurring on Prince Edward Island and throughout the rest of Canada. The author writes about a February 1<sup>st</sup> open-house meeting of the Prince Edward Island Division of the Canadian Red Cross Society. Lieutenant Colonel Howard, Commissioner of the New Brunswick Red Cross and guest speaker, is quoted as reassuring Islanders that the Hungarians "will make excellent Canadians." ("Hungarians will make fine citizens, Red Cross told", 1957). The article communicates to Islanders that the Hungarians are the right type, that they had a good appearance, that they had left their country with very little money, and that with the exception of a few aged and infirm refugees, they would make fine citizens. It was Islanders' "moral obligation" to assist the Hungarians in settling on Prince Edward Island. ("Hungarians will make fine citizens, Red Cross told", 1957). Similar to other articles, the need for clothing and other items was reiterated.

A regional response to the Hungarian refugee crisis was occurring alongside a national and international one. Similar to the larger nationally co-ordinated response that was occurring, regional bodies such as branches of the Red Cross were working in collaboration to share information and resources. This *Guardian* article also provides information on the type of immigrant that was sought and also the reasons why Islanders and the rest of Canada believed they should accommodate the refugees.

These articles demonstrate that the crisis was a newsworthy issue and that the media was interested in Hungarian and United Nations (UN) issues. It could be argued then, that Islanders were not only concerned about those refugees who were settling on Prince Edward Island, but also the regional and international response to the refugees. There are a series of articles that discuss the arrival of refugees in Halifax, Red Cross volunteers' experiences

working with the Hungarian refugees, the current situation in Hungary, and the latest news regarding UN Activities (“U.N. badge” 1956; “1,589 refugees reach Halifax on Italian liner” 1957; “Made MCA flight with Canada-bound refugees” 1957; and Marton, 1957).

The fact that Howard communicated that those selected to come to Canada were “an excellent type, rugged, good appearance, [and] healthy” (“Hungarians will make fine citizens, Red Cross told” 1957) is indicative of the type of migrant that the rural agricultural-based Island was seeking. So as to reassure Islanders that these people would contribute to the development of farms and other agricultural industries, Howard highlighted their positive physical attributes. What is interesting to note is Howard’s concern with the aged and infirm refugees who, he believed, might create problems for the Island. This contradicts the CCC’s advocacy regarding social equality and refugee selection. Thompson and Bangarth write that the CCC not only assisted in the settling of refugees, but also lobbied the government on social justice issues – one being the selection of refugees based strictly on humanitarian need. Howard’s comments indicate that there were limits to the power that the CCC’s rhetoric had over public opinion. Good physical and mental health were viewed as attributes essential for a migrant to be able to successfully contribute to the Island’s industries – and the majority of Hungarian refugees were the right type.

Indeed, this of observation “reassuring” articles is reflective of a small, but nevertheless present, counternarrative which was occurring in Canada at the time. As written about by Adam (2010), communist-driven discourses emerged which highlighted the negative economic effects the Hungarian immigration may cause. In particular, Adam (2010) notes that it was argued that the Hungarians would depress local wages and even replace local workers. Yet, overwhelmingly, the historical record shows that the majority of discourses were in favour of the Hungarian refugees.

The possible economic repercussions that were associated with receiving the refugees did not outweigh Islanders’ perceived national duty to accept these people. Writing about post-World War Two immigration, Franca Iacovetta notes that,

“[t]he dramatic story of Canada as a land of abundance – in everything from food supplies to consumer goods and political freedom – amid a world of suffering and destruction, and now threatened by spreading Communism, immediately emerged as a major theme in daily newspapers” (Iacovetta, 2006, p. 22).

Iacovetta’s observation holds true for the coverage that was given to the Hungarians in *The Guardian*. Further Troper (2010) found that through all forms of media, television broadcasts included, the Hungarian refugees were constructed as freedom fighters standing up against Soviet oppression and public opinion was in agreement. Both Iacovetta’s and Troper’s analysis align with observations of *The Guardian*. In many articles, references were made to the Communist regime that the Hungarians had fled. In an article titled, “14 Hungarians Welcomed to Province Last Night,” the contributor wrote how “[the] Hungarians stepped on Island soil last night – with the hope and intention of making this, the land of their freedom, their home.” The final stage of their passage to the Island “re-assured these people that their historic fight for freedom had been successful.” The contributor wrote that the Hungarians “fled ... Hungary ... in an effort to rid themselves from the oppression and cruelty forced on them by their Communist dominators ... [and to seek] freedom in this country” (“14 Hungarians welcomed to province last night”, 1957, p.1). Particularly in articles which

discussed the refugees' initial arrival to the country, the circumstances from which they had fled were explicitly described.

### **Cold War Escapees, Refugees, or Both?**

*The Guardian* told how “1,589 escapees from Russian-dominated Hungary arrived [in Canada]” (“1,589 refugees reach Halifax liner”, 1957, p.1). This type of rhetoric demonstrates the politics behind the Hungarians' positive reception on Prince Edward Island. These people were political symbols and Islanders were fulfilling a national duty by receiving the refugees. They were also encouraging a larger, international pro-democracy movement. Iacovetta provides reasoning as to why journalists played on the democracy versus communism, good versus evil binary. She writes that during the 1950s, journalists were enthralled by the drama of the Cold War. Through using the Hungarian migrants as characters in this drama, journalists sensationalized the Cold War. As a result, newspapers played a significant role in shaping public opinion in favour of receiving the refugees. Liebovich (1988) writes that “[t]he origins of the Cold War related to the perception of an all-encompassing mentality that drives countries to conquer and subdue, just as the Axis powers had attempted to forge a New Order in Europe and Asia. That is why news stories and editorials must be measured as a factor in how the Cold War came to start” (p.111).

The announcement in a February 27, 1957 *Guardian* article of the impending arrival of the first Hungarian refugees on the Island is indicative of the receiving community's positive reaction to the arrival of the Hungarians. (“Hungarians to arrive tonight”, 1957, p.1). Prince Edward Island's positive reaction is demonstrated by the range of community members and groups that would be greeting the refugees. The arrival of the first group of the Hungarian refugees was written about with great pomp in a *Guardian* article (“14 Hungarians welcomed to province last night”, 1957, p.1). The author wrote about 14 refugees who were greeted by a number of governmental and non-governmental representatives after they had taken a train from Borden to Charlottetown. Greeting the Hungarians were members from the Provincial [Refugee] Co-ordinating Committee, Catholic Women's League, Red Cross, Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, The Women's Institute, Knights of Columbus, Parkdale Village, an Island physician Dr. T Gencheff who was able to act as a translator, and the director of the Falconwood Refugee Centre, Dr. Murchison. The author wrote that the Hungarians were transported in “style in comfort” to the “shiny new, lobby of this fine new building [the Falconwood Refugee Centre]” (“14 Hungarians welcomed to province last night”, 1957, p.1). The involvement of a number of different governmental and nongovernmental bodies in the settling of these refugees is a defining component of the Hungarian migration to Prince Edward Island.

### **Communication Inquiry: Analysis of *The Guardian* Newspaper**

Many explicit and implicit themes are present in these articles. First, they demonstrate that presumably, public support was in favour of accommodating the Hungarian refugees from 1956-1957. Second, most articles were written as feel-good stories. It seemed as though *The Guardian* was attempting to show Islanders the product of their good will and donations. Most articles are positive overall, and do not make mention of any possible problems that might occur from the refugees settling on the Island. Third, it is evident that there was no one,

sole, organization that was receiving the refugees. It was a co-ordinated approach from a number of different bodies.

The references to the Hungarians having fled from the oppression of their Communist dictators is indicative of much more than a push-factor. It is symbolic of the political climate at the time. By accepting large numbers of persons who had opposed Communism, Canada and Canadians were assisting in a larger fight to promote democracy and undermine Communism. Dreisziger writes that, “[w]ith the Cold War at its height, empathy for the victims and opponents of Communist rule was great. The idea of standing up against overwhelming odds also fired the imagination of the Free World.” (Dreisziger, 1985, p. 200).

Supporting those who had opposed Communism may have been equally important as one’s Christian duty to accommodate the Hungarian refugees. Yet, this did not mean that there were not local concerns about these people settling into Island communities. Articles which reassure Islanders that these people are in fact good for the province and that they will “make fine citizens” demonstrate that apprehension may have existed. However, even with the Island’s economy suffering, the refugees, it was believed, would only contribute to reviving the agricultural industry.

The migration of over 37,000 Hungarians to Canada from 1956-1957 impacted all regions of the country, even the smallest province of Prince Edward Island. Newspaper articles are useful in providing a snapshot of historical moments in time, and in identifying explicit and implicit characteristics of the society.

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