

BACKGROUNDER

The Refugees of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956

When Soviet troops invaded Hungary in November, 1956, thousands of Hungarians fled to neighbouring countries. The refugees were eventually settled in other countries, including Canada. With the support of its population, Canada admitted, as immigrants, more than 37,500 Hungarian refugees during this international crisis – the largest group any country received in proportion to its population. Never before had Canada ensured the selection, transport, and establishment of so many refugees in such a short period of time, a success that can be attributed to groundbreaking federal measures and the cooperation of various branches of government and religious, ethnocultural, and community organizations.

This experience helped to shape Canada's model for the reception of refugees and confirmed a lasting shift to a more receptive attitude to immigration. This was the first large immigration wave from a communist country, and as such led the way for other such movements. Hungarian refugees contributed significantly to Canadian society, particularly to its cultural diversity by fuelling a Hungarian renaissance, and to the national economy by contributing their skills to the country's workforce.

Canada had already received several waves of immigrants starting in the late 18th century, but there was no formal policy with regard to refugees. It was believed that immigrating to the country was a privilege dependant on the needs of the nation, specifically for labour, and did not consider refugees as a distinct group of immigrants. This changed after the invasion of 1956. From the start, this event captivated the attention of Canadians. Moved by the Hungarian refugee situation, the public rallied quickly to their cause, prompting the government to do everything it could to help with their resettlement.

In one year, thousands of Hungarians settled in Canada, many of them in major cities. These refugees, many of whom were young and educated, integrated quickly into the workforce and the Canadian economy. Their arrival also helped Canadians adopt a more positive attitude toward immigration and consequently to transform Canadian immigration policies.

Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada

Created in 1919, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada advises the Minister of the Environment regarding the national historic significance of places, people and events that have marked Canada's history. The placement of a commemorative plaque represents an official recognition of historic value. It is one means of informing the public about the richness of our cultural heritage, which must be preserved for present and future generations.