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Preferential Refugee Policies in Postwar Canada

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Abstract: Canada is widely known today to accept migrants seeking refuge, however, some groups received preferential treatment when entering Canada after the Second World War. The purpose of this study is to examine the political, economic, and social reasons behind why the Canadian government wrote preferential refugee policies for specific groups seeking refuge. Utilizing government correspondence written between 1948 and 1957 and literature that reviews the implementation of public policy and its effects, this study analyzes the motivations and factors that led to the government's policy decisions on American draft dodgers fleeing the draft, Baltic refugees fleeing Soviet repatriation and rule, and Hungarian refugees who fled communism. This reveals that the Government of Canada established preferential policies for refugees based on race, religion, and assimilationist principles. It proves that although Canada embraces multiculturalism and humanitarian refugee policies today, in its past, it chose to selectively accept refugees and provide preferential avenues for refugees seeking safety in Canada.

Keywords: multiculturalism, refugees, Canadian immigration, refugee policy, public policy

Canada has long been considered a safe haven for refugees. Its institutions, immigration laws, and citizens have historically welcomed many newcomers with open arms. However, from the onset of the twentieth century, race and political beliefs guided the federal government in its choice of refugees. Refugees from preferred countries that had Canadian public support and positive perceptions toward them bypassed standard procedures and were permitted entry, while refugees coming from countries perceived as less desirable were subject to stricter refugee policies. In light of this, this article asks: what factors led Canada to enact exceptional policy for specific refugees? It proposes that race, political and economic factors, and local organizations influenced the government to bypass standard procedures for refugees among specific groups. This claim will be supported by three case studies: draft dodgers from the United States of America, Baltic refugees fleeing Soviet annexation, and Hungarian refugees arriving after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Draft dodgers sought refuge in Canada as they fled the draft into the American forces at war in Vietnam. Baltic refugees, facing Soviet threat and repatriation took it upon themselves to arrive in Canada by boat

without proper papers. Hungarian refugees largely took refuge in neighboring Austria but as Austria could not support them, Canada intervened and took in the Hungarian refugees.

Draft Dodgers of the Vietnam War

America held a draft lottery for Vietnam in 1969 and though the US appealed to Canada for help, Canada refused to join the war. With Canada's neutrality and lack of extradition agreement with the US, some American men who did not want to serve in the war sought refuge in Canada. Once in Canada, it was very hard to tell if one was an American draft dodger. Draft dodgers arriving in Canada were invisible refugees as they were white, had similar customs and practices, and spoke the English language; thus they fit into Canadian society very easily.

Political belief and the desire of the government influenced preferential policy for American draft dodgers. In the 1960s, Canadian nationalism grew and attempted to differentiate itself from the USA.¹ This sentiment led to the protest against the growing influence of foreign corporations, especially American corporations operating branch plants in Canada. It also led to a growing influence on Canadians wanting to separate and distance themselves from American ideologies, policies, and beliefs. When the USA called on Canada to aid in the war, Canada refused conscription and allowed only volunteer troops to go to Vietnam. Increasingly, Canada began establishing its policies and differentiating itself from the USA. While at the beginning of the draft, the government deported some draft dodgers, after a series of modifications to immigration policies, this changed. On 22 May 1969, the Minister of Manpower and Immigration, Allan MacEachen declared that border agents would not ask about or require military status even if the individual at a port-of-entry voluntarily provided the information. Without explicitly mentioning draft dodgers, the Minister declared that if individuals entered Canada under the then-current requirements for entry, anyone, including the draft dodgers, could enter.² The rise of Canadian nationalism and the aim to differentiate Canada from the USA shaped Canadian immigration policy to support the entry of draft dodgers into Canada.

Draft dodgers also benefited from the economic goals of the Canadian government. During the late 1960s, Canada had an increasing labor shortage rate: in 1966, it was 3% to 4% and in 1969, it was 5% to 6%.³ Canada lacked skilled laborers in the workforce, therefore, the Department of Immigration proposed to create a preferential treatment policy for American immigrants entering Canada.⁴ The government favored American immigrants because they spoke English and had a similar culture. This preferential treatment also made its way into Canadian immigration policy. Draft dodgers fulfilled the education, work experience, and language requirements of the points system. Their prior postsecondary education from the US meant that they would not need to undergo further training and delay their entry into the workforce and their young age meant that they would contribute to the Canadian economy for a longer duration.⁵ In addition, many draft dodgers also did not have families because of their young age and could focus on working. As draft dodgers were invisible immigrants, they integrated easily into the Canadian workplace.

Local organizations in Canada played an important role in assisting American draft dodgers to come to Canada. Their actions also persuaded additional American young men drafted who had thought of seeking refuge in Canada to act on that thought. Almost all the major cities in Canada had support organizations in place, namely the Vancouver Committee to Aid American War Objectors (VCAAWO), the Toronto American Exiles Association, Student Union for Peace Action (SUPA), and the National Council for Universal and Unconditional Amnesty (NCUUA). These organizations assisted American draft dodgers seeking to enter Canada, finding housing and employment once in Canada, and lobbied the government for better policy and regulations that paved the way for American draft dodgers to enter Canada easily. The VCAAWO, for example, released a brief in disagreement with the government's 1966 White Paper. One of the Paper's policies, which prohibited the entry of "fugitives from justice," did not sit well with the organization. The VCAAWO believed that this clause would explicitly target draft dodgers.⁶ In addition to lobbying efforts, local organizations provided services to draft dodgers, such as immigration counseling, housing, and employment services. The organizations made sure to publicize the services offered to the draft dodgers to the

American public via popular American magazines.

American draft dodgers sought refuge in Canada from the brutal and immoral idea of going to war in Vietnam. Canada was the closest country that would accept American draft dodgers and a place where draft dodgers could live a very similar lifestyle. From the Canadian government's standpoint, the arrival of American draft dodgers was beneficial to the Canadian government as Canada was in a critical shortage of laborers, especially skilled workers. Draft dodgers, most of whom had post-secondary education and could easily integrate into the Canadian workforce were ideal, if not the preferred candidates for entry into Canada and the Canadian government made sure that government policies made way for their entry into Canada.

Baltic Refugees after the Second World War

Beginning in 1948, Baltic refugees came to Canada, some of whom were under threat of expatriation to the Soviet Union after the Yalta Agreement. Frustrated at the long delays in processing their applications, the refugees purchased wooden boats and fled to Canada even though the official government position was that "...no assurances can be given that persons, who come to Canada under circumstances which in effect violate the immigration regulations, will be granted a landing."⁷ Immigration regulations prohibited these individuals from entering Canada because Canadian officials had to process their applications in their places of residence, before arriving. Nonetheless, these refugees arrived illegally in Canada at Pier 21 in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Once they arrived in Canada, however, the government supported the arrival of the Baltic refugees based on their race and the threat of the Cold War to these populations. Especially with Baltic refugees, the idea of the northern European race as favorable immigrants significantly influenced Canadian immigration policy. The northern European race belief held that groups in northern Europe and Canadians in the Western Hemisphere adapted to the cold climatic conditions based on Canadian geography; these conditions supposedly made northern Europeans stronger in both mental and physical capacities.⁸ Within the government, strong attachment to the Baltic refugees

through these ideologies influenced the relaxation of government policy. The Vice-Consul of the Canadian Consulate General in New York, A.E.L. Cannon, wrote, "I do not know the policy of the Immigration authorities, but it would seem to me that the Baltic immigrants would be most desirable settlers and would become easily acclimatized to Canadian conditions."⁹

The Canadian government also used Baltic refugees as a mechanism in the fight against Communism. Sweden had a history of forcefully repatriating hundreds of Baltic refugees back to the Soviet Union. Individuals within the government believed that they could use Baltic refugees as a tool against Communism. One Canadian immigration officer in Sweden wrote to the immigration department in Ottawa, explicitly claiming that "In my opinion, Canada will never be sorry for taking Baltic people as every last one of them are the best advertisement we will get in our country against Communism."¹⁰ Accepting Baltic refugees, who were threatened with forced repatriation, would show Canada's indirect success in combatting the growing influence of the Soviet Union's communism, sparked in the postwar era.

Many of the Baltic refugees were well-educated people. Before the war, the Baltic people's commercial probity, well-educated status, and skilled workforce were widely known in Europe.¹¹ This was a favorable aspect for Canadian immigration officials looking for desirable immigrants who fell under the categories of "General Labourers, Cabinet Makers, Domestic, nurses and nurses' aides, unattached single farm workers, farming families, stonemasons, bricklayers, plasterers, and families who can transfer \$2 000."¹² While in Sweden, Baltic refugees who had been professionals took employment as manual laborers. Therefore, upon arrival in Canada, they made excellent immigration candidates, as there was an abundance of manufacturing work in Canada. Because of this, it was easy for immigration officials to help Baltic refugees find work in Canada. In the example of Estonian refugees in Canada, the government paired 60 Estonian men with a company in Rolphton, Ontario, at a hydro-electric power construction site. Previously, the Estonian men held professional occupations, among them a "physician, a senior army officer, a judge, an economist, an architect, a lawyer." Nonetheless, it was reported that they adapted well to manual labor roles.¹³ The government and

employers believed that with good character, Baltic refugees were well suited to work as laborers in Canada, thereby influencing government policy to accept Baltic refugees.

Local churches in Canada also played a significant role in changing the government perception toward Baltic refugees. When the *SS Walnut* arrived in Halifax in December 1948 with undocumented refugees, the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) Canada Synod lobbied for the entry of the passengers. In the first of a series of letters, Pastor S.F.M. Friedrichsen of the ULCA pleaded to the government for the entry of those aboard the *SS Walnut*, explicitly mentioning that those onboard the ship were Lutherans. The Pastor supported his plea by adding that the Lutherans were good people, but desperate circumstances had led them to take the illegal route to arrive in Canada.¹⁴ Eventually, the lobbying efforts of the Church paid off as the government allowed the entry of the refugees. In addition to lobbying the government, the Lutheran Church in Canada sponsored many Estonian refugees, provided aid, and helped them find jobs once they arrived in Canada. The Canadian Lutheran World Relief organization (CLWR) also aided in painting the image of Lutherans entering Canada by boat as “hard-workers, democratic, intelligent, and loyal,” hoping to create an image that fit what the government officials sought when selecting refugees – their loyalty to Canada, ability to work as laborers, and their support for democracy.¹⁵

According to immigration regulations at the time, the government should not have allowed Baltic refugees entry into Canada as they would have had to enter with already confirmed immigration papers. This practice, of course, changed with the arrival of the nine vessels with hundreds of Baltic refugees. Even with the strict immigration regulations in place, of the 987 Baltic refugees who arrived in Canada, between August 1948 and December 1949, the government denied entry to only 12 passengers. The northern European race belief and political desire to use Baltic refugees as tools against Soviet Communism guided the government in its relaxation of strict policy. The government also recognized that it could not ignore the economic benefits that Baltic refugees promised as they settled in Canada and the strong influences of the churches, therefore, led to preferential treatment and leniency of immigration policy for Baltic refugees.

Hungarian Refugees after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956

In October 1956, dissatisfied with the Communist government, Hungarian students took to the streets in protest. However, in less than a month, the Soviet forces crushed the rebellion and installed a new Soviet-influenced government.¹⁶ About 200,000 Hungarians fled the country due to violence, with many arriving in Austria. With Austria overburdened with refugees and requesting assistance, the Canadian government stepped in to resettle Hungarian refugees because of the desired technical skills and the ability to use them as a tool against Communism.

While there were negative perceptions towards Central Europeans at this time, Hungarians bypassed the race question because they were considered white Europeans. Further, the fact that a majority of Hungarians were Christian reinforced the belief that Hungarians would easily integrate into Canadian society, which Canadian officials thought of as a priority for refugees.¹⁷ When Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) in Ontario Donald Cameron MacDonald spoke about how he had brought in one Hungarian student into his home, the MPP claimed that though the student was foreign to the customs and practices in Canada, he had no problem fitting into the Canadian society.¹⁸ Integration into society plays a large role when the Canadian government decides if a refugee group is permissible in Canada. In the case of Hungarian refugees, their whiteness, similar religion, and their ability to integrate easily into Canadian society proved them as favorable refugees to Canada.

Labelled “freedom fighters,” the refugees were an effective tool for the Canadian government in its fight against Communism. A letter written within the Department of External Affairs Canada mentions that the Headquarters of the World Federation of Democratic Youth was in Budapest and the use of Hungarian student refugees as “counter-propaganda” would be effective for the upcoming World Youth Festival in Moscow.¹⁹ Similarly, the American delegation to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) thought that spreading information about the good deeds that countries, including Canada, were doing in assisting to Hungary would benefit the public’s opinion of NATO, especially with the eruption of the Suez Crisis three months before and the less-than-formidable image of the international organization.²⁰

Largely, the Canadian government looked at the economic benefits of the Hungarian refugees. J.W. Pickersgill, then Minister of Immigration explicitly claimed that Canada was expecting a labor shortage due to the strong postwar economy and that it desperately needed laborers to fill those vacancies.²¹ Moreover, the strong postwar economy at the time meant that to the government, there was no reason to deny the refugees entry into Canada as laborers, thus, the motivation to search for laborers heavily influenced refugee policy during the Hungarian refugee crisis of 1956. Among Hungarian refugee applicants, 70% of the men processed were under the age of 40 and preferences were made to refugees capable of working as laborers in Canada rather than the elderly and the sick.²²

The Hungarian refugee crisis was sparked by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, a movement largely led by students, thus the refugee population included many students as well. Once the Canadian universities and government officials became aware of this, many scrambled to accommodate different faculty and students into their universities. For Canadian universities, it meant government funding as Ottawa paid for all refugee students' boarding and education, and reputable faculty from Hungary could be recruited to teach at their institutions. For government officials, it meant technical laborers who would graduate and contribute to the Canadian economy. The University of British Columbia (UBC) recruited students and faculty from Hungary's Sopron University Faculty of Forestry and permitted them to run autonomously within the UBC campus and provided degrees to Sopron students.²³ UBC's support for the Sopron University's Faculty of Forestry led to financial assistance from the Powell River Logging Company.²⁴ Upon graduation from the Forestry program, students then joined the British Columbia logging industry, an industry that lacked laborers.

Canada had a vibrant postwar economy with growth seen especially in the manufacturing sector. The country, however, lacked skilled workers and unskilled laborers. To Canadian officials, the Hungarian refugee crisis was an opportunity to increase the workforce. In addition, the fact that they were white and mainly Christian and were students who fought against Communism as "freedom fighters" made them favorable refugee candidates. Moreover, universities increasingly saw Hungarian

refugees as an asset to their institutions. Seeing these benefits, government officials made it easier for Hungarian refugees to apply for refuge in Canada.

Conclusion

The Government of Canada accepted the three groups of refugees based on political beliefs and preferential race, the economic situation, and the influence of local organizations in Canada. However, in years following the establishment of multiculturalism and rights-based liberalism in Canada, the government reversed its foreign policy to accept an increasing number of refugees and embrace humanitarianism. Nonetheless, for other refugee groups that attempted to arrive in Canada, such as the Chilean refugees, the government limited the number of refugees who could arrive in Canada because as non-white refugees who did not speak English, the government considered them as “unfavourable” refugees from “non-preferred” countries.

By contrast, American draft dodgers seeking refuge from mandatory calls to serve in the armed forces, Baltic refugees fleeing repatriation to the Soviet Union, and Hungarian refugees seeking refuge from Communism all found a place in Canada to call home, safely and easily. It was evident that the government refugee policy became relaxed when it came to preferred refugee groups. Based on the group’s race, the government’s political beliefs, economic desires, and the influences of local groups in Canada, preferential treatment would be given to different groups of refugees, especially those who were white, Christian, and with the skills necessary to integrate into Canadian society.



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Notes

- ¹ Renée G. Kasinsky, *Refugees from Militarism: Draft-Age Americans in Canada* (Livingston, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1976), 56.
- ² Library and Archives Canada, Privy Council Office, RG 2, “Admission to Canada of Draft Dodgers and Military Deserters,” volume 6340, in Cabinet Conclusions, May 15, 1969.
- ³ Jessica Squires, *Building Sanctuary: The Movement to Support Vietnam War Resisters in Canada, 1965-73*. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 44.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.
- ⁵ Valerie Knowles, *Forging Our Legacy: Canadian Citizenship and Immigration, 1900-1977* (Ottawa: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000), 83-84.
- ⁶ Squires, *Building Sanctuary*, 140-41.
- ⁷ Library and Archives Canada, RG.76-1-A-1, volume 668, file “Letter from M.L. Keenleyside, Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources to R.N. Bryson, Honorary Consul of Latvia” reproduction copy number C10602-4860, September 1, 1948.
- ⁸ Carl Berger, “The True North Strong and Free,” in *Nationalism in Canada*, edited by Peter Russell (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 5-6.
- ⁹ Library and Archives Canada, RG.76-1-A-1, volume 668, file “Letter from A.E.L. Cannon, Vice Consul of The Canadian Consul-General, New York City to The Acting Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, Ottawa” reproduction copy number C10602-4860, October 27, 1948.
- ¹⁰ Library and Archives Canada, RG.76-1-A-1, volume 668, file “Letter from A.A. Ewen, Officer-in-Charge, at immigration office in Stockholm, Sweden to Commissioner, Immigration Branch, Oversea Service, Ottawa” reproduction copy number C10602-4860, May 16, 1949.
- ¹¹ Library and Archives Canada, “Letter from British Commission for the Baltic Provinces to Dr. J.W. Robertson, Office of the High Commissioner for Canada,” September 14, 1920.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Karl Aun, *The Political Refugees: A History of the Estonians in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 23.
- ¹⁴ Library and Archives Canada, RG.76-1-A-1, volume 668, file “Letter from Pastor S.F.M. Friedrichsen at The Evangelical Lutheran Immigrant Mission of the ULCA Canada Synod to H.L. Keenleyside, Deputy Minister of Mines and Resources” reproduction copy number C10602-19279, December 11, 1949.
- ¹⁵ Lynda Mannik, *Photography, Memory, and Refugee Identity: The Voyage of the SS Walnut, 1948* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 64.
- ¹⁶ Janos M. Rainer, “Chapter 1: The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Causes, Aims, and Course of Events” in *The 1956 Hungarian Revolution: Hungarian and Canadian Perspectives*, ed. Christopher Adam, Tibor Egervari, Leslie Laczko & Judy Young (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010).
- ¹⁷ Hungarian Central Statistical Office, *Hungarian Religion Statistics: Religion, Denomination, 1920-2011*.
- ¹⁸ Ontario, Legislative Assembly of Ontario, *Debates*, 25-3 (February 4, 1957).
- ¹⁹ Library and Archives Canada, “Letter from James Cross to Jim” Department of External Affairs Canada, (Ottawa), January 31, 1957.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Library and Archives Canada, “Letter from J.W. Pickersgill to Senator H. de M. Molson” Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, (Ottawa), February 1, 1957.

- ²² Library and Archives Canada, "Memorandum from Joseph L. Bottlik to Leslie M. Frost, QC. Prime Minister of the Province of ON regarding the visit of John Yaremko MPP, QC and Joseph L. Bottlik to Hungarian Refugees in Europe" (Ottawa), n.d., 12; Ontario, Legislative Assembly of Ontario, *Debates*, 25-3 (February 4, 1957), 119.
- ²³ Laura Madokoro, "The Refugee Ritual: Sopron Students in Canada," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 19, no. 1 (2008): 257.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 257.

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