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McKallip, Ava

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**Beyond Assimilation:
The Dual Identity of 1956 Hungarian Freedom Fighters in the United States**

*Ava McKallip*¹

On 23 October 1956, Hungarian citizens of varying educational levels, social classes, and political affiliations joined forces to oppose Soviet control and to reinstate Hungarian sovereignty. On this day, students from Budapest Technical University marched to the Hungarian Parliament and a local radio station, calling for the removal of Russians from Hungary and the improvement of Hungary's economic and social conditions.² The students' demonstrations quickly became violent, and fighting spread from Budapest into the surrounding countryside.³ Influenced by Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidential campaign and Western broadcasts, many of these revolutionaries began their uprising with the expectation of receiving support from the United States. This aid never arrived. Instead, Soviet reinforcements appeared on 4 November 1956 and quickly crushed the Revolution.⁴ This swift loss forced Hungarian revolutionaries to make a choice: seek refuge in Western nations or remain in Hungary at the risk of Soviet retribution.⁵

In the wake of the Revolution, around 200,000 Hungarians chose to flee their home country.⁶ By 1957, over thirty thousand of these Hungarian refugees had arrived in the United States in an operation often depicted as the most rapid and successful integration of refugees into the country to date.⁷ Numerous works detail the processes of accepting and integrating these refugees into the economic structure of the United States, but few make distinctions within the larger group of Hungarian refugees who resettled in the United States between 1956 and 1957.⁸ More notably, few works distinguish between those Hungarian refugees who fled their homes in 1956 for fear of retribution for their participation in the revolution, or the Hungarian "freedom fighters", and those who left for other social, political, or economic reasons.

¹ Ava McKallip is a 2025 graduate from the University of Alabama and a current J.D. candidate at Yale Law School.

² James Michener, *The Bridge at Andau* (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 20-1.

³ Terry Cox, "Hungary 1956," *History Ireland* 14, no. 3 (2006): p. 41-2.

⁴ Furlow, "Revolution and Refugees," 101-2; Cox, "Hungary 1956," p. 42.

⁵ Cox, "Hungary 1956," p. 42.

⁶ Cox, "Hungary 1956," p. 43.

⁷ James P. Niessen, "Hungarian Refugees of 1956: From the Border to Austria, Camp Kilmer, and Elsewhere," *Hungarian Cultural Studies* 9 (2016): p. 123.

⁸ Niessen, "Hungarian Refugees of 1956," p. 129-130.

After fighting in a revolution steeped in nationalist ideologies and relocating to the very country that had refused aid in their struggle, the former Hungarian “freedom fighters” held views of themselves, their culture, and their political responsibilities that were distinct from those of their older, less patriotic counterparts. Having directly risked their lives to restore Hungary's sovereignty, the freedom fighters largely viewed themselves as crusaders for their homeland and were highly idealistic, nationalistic, and traditional. Many were also disenchanted with Western ideologies, viewing the United States’ lack of involvement in the Revolution as a broken promise. Upon arriving in the United States, these refugees had to reconcile their patriotic and nationalistic identities with the inevitability of adapting to a new life. This conflict between self-perception and forced relocation raises the following question: how did those Hungarian refugees who fought in the 1956 revolution reconcile their Hungarian nationalist and Western-averse sympathies with the reality of forming a new life within the political and cultural systems of the United States?

Despite the possibility of permanent separation from their home country, the Hungarian freedom fighters maintained a strong interest in Hungarian politics and culture after relocating to the U.S. These former revolutionaries formed or joined Hungarian political organizations in the U.S., through which they lobbied for Western intervention in Hungary. Many were also settled within existing Hungarian American communities, through which they remained deeply rooted in Hungarian culture, passed their native language and traditions on to their children, and formed close-knit social communities with which to celebrate Hungarian holidays, language, and history. As most revolutionaries were young adults, many Hungarian freedom fighters chose to pursue an education in the U.S. Most former revolutionaries also eventually economically rooted themselves in the U.S. Considering each of these layers of adaptation, Hungarian refugees who fought in the 1956 Revolution reconciled their Hungarian identity with their relocation to the United States by forming a distinct “dual identity.” To do so, they preserved their cultural traditions and continued their involvement in Hungarian politics while also economically and socially adapting to a new life in the United States.

Western efforts to resettle Hungarian refugees in the wake of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution are well-documented in historical works. Arthur Markowitz’s “Humanitarianism versus Restrictionism,” Carl Bon Tempo’s *Americans at the Gate*, and Gusttáz Kecskés’ “A Cold War Humanitarian Action,” detail well the United States’ resettlement of Hungarian refugees as well as the country’s political motivation for doing so.⁹ Fewer works discuss the success of these resettlement

⁹ Arthur A. Markowitz, “Humanitarianism versus Restrictionism: The United States and the Hungarian Refugees,” *The International Migration Review* 7, no. 1 (1973): p. 46–59; Carl Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees During the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 34-59; Gusttáz Kecskés, “A Cold War Humanitarian Action: The

efforts from the perspective of Hungarian refugees' adaptation to the U.S. Weinstock's work, *Acculturation and Occupation*, seeks to statistically quantify differences in the speed and success of the 1956 Hungarian refugees' acculturation to the U.S. based on demographics.¹⁰ In doing so, Weinstock distinguishes Hungarian refugees' acculturation, or adaptation, to life in the U.S. from assimilation, arguing that the 1956 Hungarian refugees settled in the U.S. without a complete loss of their original culture.¹¹ Weinstock's study is supported by Peter Pastor, who emphasizes the speed and success of the relocation of Hungarian refugees. Pastor also argues that while many Hungarian refugees successfully adapted to American social life, they did so while retaining deep connections to their original Hungarian culture.¹² Current scholarship effectively establishes that the 1956 Hungarian refugees adapted to life in the U.S. without losing their original culture or ideologies. Still, these works fail to distinguish among refugees based on their reasons for fleeing Hungary. Due to this failure, current scholarship struggles to separate adaptation trends observed across all 1956 Hungarian refugees from those observed only within specific demographic groups of Hungarians.

This paper seeks to make this distinction by focusing only on those Hungarian refugees who fought in the 1956 revolution, or the Hungarian "freedom fighters." By viewing these freedom fighters as a group of 1956 Hungarian refugees with distinct demographic characteristics and ideological beliefs, this paper addresses the failure of previous scholarship to distinguish between subgroups of Hungarian refugees when evaluating their adaptation to the United States. To do so, this paper analyzes the oral statements of three men and three women who were interviewed by Columbia University shortly after fleeing Hungary following their involvement in the Hungarian Revolution. These interviews were chosen to account for differences in age, education, revolutionary activity, and gender among freedom fighters. While these refugees are too few to represent the beliefs of all revolutionaries, they offer critical insight into how Hungarian freedom fighters viewed themselves, their country, and Western ideals shortly after arriving in the United States. This evidence is supported by letters and official documents created by Hungarian American organizations, such as the Hungarian Freedom Fighters Federation and the Association of Hungarian Students, that worked within the United States to advocate for Western aid to Hungary for multiple years after the Hungarian Revolution. Newspaper articles from this period also provide evidence of the way Hungarian refugees

Western Admission of 1956 Hungarian Refugees," *Hungarian Historical Review* 11: 4 (2022), p. 913-35.

¹⁰ S. Alexander Weinstock, *Acculturation and Occupation: A Study of the 1956 Hungarian Refugees in the United States* (Spring Science+Business Media, 1969).

¹¹ Weinstock, *Acculturation and Occupation*.

¹² Peter Pastor, "The American Reception and Settlement of Hungarian Refugees in 1956-1957," *Hungarian Cultural Studies, E-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association* 9, (2016): p. 197-205.

adapted to life in the United States in the years following their resettlement. Each of these sources reflects how Hungarian freedom fighters viewed their own identity upon arriving in the United States, how they assimilated Western culture, and how they negotiated a compromise between these ideals.

By narrowing the discussion to only those refugees who participated in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, this paper provides a nuanced perspective on the established understanding of the resettlement success of the 1956 Hungarian refugees in the United States. This paper also underscores the political motivations behind oversimplifying all 1956 Hungarian refugees as freedom fighters, highlighting how the United States fed this generalization to portray Hungarian refugees as “victims of communism.” This portrayal strengthened the United States global image of superiority in the context of its ongoing power struggle with the communist Soviet Union. This analysis also expands upon the distinction between assimilation and adaptation previously presented by Weinstock, illustrating that the economic and social adaptation of 1956 Hungarian refugees in no way equated to their “assimilation”, or melting, into the general American culture. This distinction contributes to modern critiques of the concept of the American “melting pot”. It furthers the idea that the general “American culture” is a mosaic of individual cultures, linked by economics and politics but in no way a uniform entity. In doing so, this research emphasizes the relevance of modern pursuits to understand how unique demographics or identities may alter immigrant adaptation trends.

Arrival in the United States

The demographics of the approximately 30,000 Hungarian Refugees who arrived in the United States are well characterized by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report released in 1996. The CIA estimated that around 188,000 people, or two percent of Hungary’s population, fled following the 1956 revolution.¹³ Eighty-three percent of the U.S. Hungarian refugees were under 40 years old, and sixty-four percent were male.¹⁴ Many refugees were also highly educated, with the average refugee over the age of 16 having around 10 years of educational experience.¹⁵ While no specific count exists, likely a substantial percentage of the Hungarian refugees who arrived in the U.S. were Jewish. Niessen estimates that one third of Hungary’s Jewish population, or between 15,000 and 30,000, fled following the Revolution, with most landing in the United States, United Kingdom, or Israel.¹⁶ While this small portion of the 1956 Hungarian refugees may have fled due to fears or experiences of anti-semitism, Niessen argues that the motivations of the 1956 Hungarian refugees were more complex. Political

¹³ Central Intelligence Agency, “Report on Hungarian Refugees,” *CIA Historical Review Program*, July 2, 1996.

¹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, “Report on Hungarian Refugees.”

¹⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, “Report on Hungarian Refugees.”

¹⁶ Niessen, “Hungarian Refugees of 1956,” p. 124-8.

uncertainty, economic destitution, and Soviet retaliation all likely played significant roles in motivating Hungarians to flee their home country.¹⁷

Regardless of the differing demographics and motivations of those Hungarian Refugees who arrived in the United States, most experienced similar conditions upon their arrival. American officials rapidly processed refugees at Camp Kilmer, a former military barracks near New Brunswick, New Jersey. Here, the U.S. Army, Red Cross, and other private agencies fed and housed the refugees while also providing medical care.¹⁸ Radio Free Europe also stationed itself within the camp to allow refugees to notify family and friends in other nations that they had safely arrived in America.¹⁹ The Labor Department's Bureau of Employment Security sought proper job placements for Hungarian refugees. This bureau sent a team to Vienna to organize refugees based on their previous employment and training. Once refugees reached the U.S., the government used this training information to match refugees with available job offers. This elaborate system was quite successful, and by March of 1957, only about 1,600 of the camp's original 27,000 occupants remained.²⁰ Most Hungarian refugees who left the camp permanently adapted to American life, and only around 147 of the refugees who arrived in the U.S. are thought to have returned to Hungary in the years immediately following the revolution.²¹

The acceptance and resettlement of the 1956 Hungarian refugees often occurred under the incorrect blanket assumption that most of these refugees were freedom fighters. Government officials and the American media fed this image, hoping to increase support for Hungarian refugees' resettlement in the U.S. Popular opinion initially portrayed the 1956 Hungarians as "victims of Communism," a projection which justified lax screening for these refugees' political affiliation and background.²² Such seemingly haphazard acceptance, while meant to project a positive global image of the U.S., prompted mounting controversy among the American public.²³ To combat this, the Eisenhower administration launched a public relations campaign focused on portraying the Hungarian refugees as "American."²⁴ The scholar Bon Tempo discusses how magazines and newspapers from this time highlighted Hungarians who embodied the gender roles and family values of Americans,

¹⁷ Niessen, "Hungarian Refugees of 1956," p. 123.

¹⁸ Richard Lyons, "Army Trying Hard at Camp Kilmer to make Hungarian Refugees Happy: Camp Kilmer Tries Hard to make Refugees Happy," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, Dec 15, 1956.

¹⁹ Lyons, "Army Trying Hard at Camp Kilmer."

²⁰ Markowitz, "Humanitarianism Versus Restrictionism," p. 49.

²¹ Pastor, "The American Reception and Settlement," p. 201.

²² Pastor, "The American Reception and Settlement," p. 200; Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, p. 60-4.

²³ Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, p. 61.

²⁴ Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, p. 78.

marketing these refugees as a group willing and able to melt into the general U.S. culture.²⁵ By incorrectly overgeneralizing all Hungarian refugees as “revolutionaries” who had fought against communism, and portraying these refugees as a group easily adapted to U.S. life, the U.S. government effectively strengthened American support for the acceptance of this group.²⁶

Despite the portrayal of all Hungarian refugees as freedom fighters, only around five percent of the 200,000 Hungarians who fled in 1956 had directly participated in the Hungarian revolution.²⁷ Because this revolution had grown from the ideas of university students and workers, those who were actual freedom fighters were generally younger, better educated, and more patriotic than their counterparts. Weinstock’s work, *Acculturation and Occupation*, highlights the way such demographic differences influenced the acculturation, or cultural transmission, of the 1956 Hungarian refugees in the United States. Weinstock found that those refugees who held high levels of education, either in Hungary or in the United States, acculturated faster to life in the United States.²⁸ Conversely, those refugees who followed the political developments in Hungary or sought to live with fellow Hungarians in the U.S. acculturated more slowly.²⁹ No trends were found in association with age.³⁰ These trends underscore the importance of considering demographic differences between the younger, highly educated freedom fighters and the older, less-skilled Hungarian Refugees when analyzing their adaptation to the U.S. The freedom fighters’ relatively low level of acculturation to the U.S., despite their higher levels of education and youth, also underscores how the unique revolutionary, nationalistic ideologies of this group shaped their adaptation to the United States.

Emotional Adaptation

Both the freedom fighters and the general 1956 Hungarian refugee population initially experienced great emotional distress at their relocation to the U.S. Feeling guilt for leaving relatives behind in Hungary, they grasped tightly to their friendships and connections with fellow Hungarians at Camp Kilmer. On the initial reactions of the Hungarian refugees at Camp Kilmer, an American social scientist wrote, “they were quite aware that, if they had not come to the United States, they would have

²⁵ Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, p. 78-80.

²⁶ Gil Loescher and John Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America’s Half-Open Door, 1945 to Present* (New York: the Free Press, 1986), p. 51-60.

²⁷ Niessen, “Hungarian Refugees of 1956,” p. 124.

²⁸ Weinstock, *Acculturation and Occupation*, p. 64-67.

²⁹ Weinstock, *Acculturation and Occupation*, p. 76, 86.

³⁰ Weinstock, *Acculturation and Occupation*, p. 60-1.

been deported to Siberia. They were appreciative, grateful... and unhappy.”³¹ While this quote did not come from the testimonies of any single Hungarian refugee, the fact that an American involved in the refugee relief process was able to acknowledge the deep distress of these refugees is telling. The U.S. was the desired destination for many Hungarian refugees who initially made their way through Austria and Western Europe. Still, this desire did not equate to being content with relocation or wanting to let go of one’s previous family, friends, or country. Other psychological studies found similar symptoms of stress among Hungarian refugees. In Canada and Great Britain, studies on the psychological distress of 1956 Hungarian refugees found that many refugees were treated for mental health issues upon relocation. Many felt unhappy or isolated, and they reacted to their resettlement by being overly critical or apathetic.³² While it is likely that the majority of relocated Hungarian refugees did not need treatment for mental health, those who were treated illuminate the fact that this transition was not easy for everyone. In fact, relocation and subsequent attempts at assimilation may have led to great mental and emotional stress.

Political Adaptation

Political adaptation did not follow similar trends. Among the 1956 Hungarian refugees, those who participated in the revolution demonstrated a strong determination to remain involved in Hungary's political events. Evidence of such political interests can be found in interviews conducted by Columbia University with Hungarian revolutionaries shortly after they arrived in the United States. The interview with an unnamed refugee, labelled “17-M”, documents the experiences and opinions of a 23-year-old Jewish man who left Hungary on 11 November 1956 and arrived in the U.S. on 23 December 1956. A university student in Budapest, this refugee attended revolutionary meetings on 22 November and participated in fighting from 4 November to 6 November, 1956.³³ Throughout his interview, he repeatedly stressed a desire for Hungarians to be perceived by the United States as “freedom-loving people” who had had communism imposed upon them.³⁴ He also expressed hopes of joining a Hungarian exile organization in the United States under General Béla Király, so that he could

³¹ “Information on Camp Kilmer,” 1957. HU OSA 398-0-1-8524; Records of the UN Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary: UN Documents; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

³² J. Donald Cohon, “Psychological Adaptation and Dysfunction among Refugees,” *The International Migration Review* 15, no. 1/2 (1981), p. 258-9.

³³ 17-M, “CURPH Interview 17-M with a 1956 Hungarian Refugee: 23 Years Old, Male, University Student,” Interviewed by Ivancho, March 15, 1957, HU OSA 414-0-2-10, Donald and Vera Blinken Collection on Hungarian Refugees of 1956: Transcripts of Refugee Interviews, Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, p. 1-9.

³⁴ 17-M, “CURPH Interview 17-M,” p. 43.

influence Western governments to provide aid to Hungary. While the answers of this refugee are not entirely organic – the interview was guided by a formulaic set of questions composed by Columbia and had to be translated from Hungarian to English – the profound pride that “17-M” holds for his country is still clear. Even though the failed revolution forced him to relocate to a foreign country, he does not appear to have given up on the sentiments that initially sparked this conflict. Instead, he freely and openly expresses his desire to translate his love for his home into political action on behalf of Hungary. This desire for political action is also seen in the Columbia interview of a 31-year-old Catholic woman labelled “74-F”. This interviewee was a bus conductor who, alongside her husband, took up arms against the Soviet Union on 23 October 1956. By the time of this interview, “17-M” had already settled in New Jersey with a job and a child, yet her passion for Hungary’s plight does not appear to have dimmed. In discussing the conflict, she plainly states that the Revolution sparked a “fire in Hungary will never be put out again.”³⁵ She carried this spark to the United States, where, like “17-M”, she hoped to join a political organization focused on informing Hungary and helping new Hungarian emigres integrate into the United States.³⁶

The Columbia interview with “11-F”, an unnamed, Catholic, 19-year-old female teacher who left Hungary on 22 November and arrived in the United States on 25 December 1956, offers a final piece of evidence of freedom fighters’ desire to retain the political mission of the Hungarian Revolution. Although she never took up arms, “11-F” joined demonstrations before the fighting and assisted those wounded during the Revolution. Reiterating what the previous interviewees stated, she articulated a disappointment in the West, which had “missed the boat” on dealing “effectively and once and for all with the Soviet.”³⁷ She believed nothing would change in Hungary without aid from the West, and she urged those who escaped to the U.S. to remain active in Hungary’s cause.³⁸ Her love for her country was clear; she seemed to want nothing more than to help and celebrate her home. This former revolutionary’s simultaneous frustration with the West and willingness to settle there underscores the multiple facets of the “freedom fighters” adaptation to the U.S. and the importance many placed on remaining politically active.

³⁵ 74-F, “CURPH Interview 74-F,” p. 15.

³⁶ 74-F, “CURPH Interview 74-F with a 1956 Hungarian Refugee: 31 Years Old, Female, Bus conductor,” Interviewed by Podhorsky, July 17, 1957, HU OSA 414-0-2-73, Donald and Vera Blinken Collection on Hungarian Refugees of 1956: Transcripts of Refugee Interviews; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, p. 1-2.

³⁷ 11-F, “CURPH Interview 11-F with a 1956 Hungarian Refugee: 23 Years Old, Female, Teacher,” Interviewed by Podhorsky, March 11, 1957, HU OSA 414-0-2-4, Donald and Vera Blinken Collection on Hungarian Refugees of 1956: Transcripts of Refugee Interviews; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, p. 4.

³⁸ 11-F, “CURPH Interview 11-F,” p. 49.

The desires of these freedom fighters to retain close political ties to Hungary came to fruition in the form of U.S. political organizations. The political organizations these refugees joined or formed can be classified into two major categories. Political organizations such as the Hungarian Scout Organization or the American Hungarian Coalition in Washington, D.C. often earned the title of “Bridge Builders”, meaning they encouraged close collaboration between Hungary and the West in hopes of inspiring the democratization of Hungary from within its current governing system.³⁹ Conversely, groups such as the Hungarian Freedom Fighters Federation advocated for direct attempts to overthrow the Soviet communist rule in Hungary in favor of a democratic system.⁴⁰

Outside of these two umbrellas, another notable political group was the Hungarian National Council in the United States, which was established in November of 1947.⁴¹ While this council had little impact on the start of the 1956 revolution, it grew in significance after the 1956 revolution, adding key revolutionary figures such as Béla Király, the commander of ground forces in Budapest, and József Kövágó, the Mayor of Budapest during the revolution.⁴² Another group, the Federation of Hungarian Former Political Prisoners, brought awareness to the conditions faced by Hungarian prisoners and pushed for the freedom of Hungarian revolutionaries imprisoned after the Revolution.⁴³ These organizations are important highlights among the plethora of political groups that 1956 Hungarian freedom fighters either joined or created in America after their resettlement, each aimed at preserving the goals of the Hungarian revolution.

The impact and aims of the Hungarian American political groups are made clear by a closer analysis of the Hungarian Freedom Fighters Federation (HFFF). The HFFF, founded by General Béla Király to continue the fight for Hungary’s liberation, was among the most active organizations in lobbying for Western political aid in Hungary.⁴⁴ Composed entirely of former Hungarian revolutionaries, this organization aimed to promote the “independence, fundamental freedom and human rights” of both Hungary and its exiles.⁴⁵ To do so, it repeatedly pressed for Western acknowledgment and aid of Hungary’s struggle. In 1957, General Béla Király delivered an address to

³⁹ Tamas Tamas, “Evolution of a Global Community: New Jersey Hungarians in a Trans-National Ethnic Network,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 10, no. 4 (1997), p. 620-1.

⁴⁰ Tamas, “Evolution of a Global Community,” p. 620-1.

⁴¹ John Foster Leich, “Great Expectations: The National Councils in Exile 1950–60,” *The Polish Review* 35, no. 3/4 (1990), p. 186-187.

⁴² Leich, “Great Expectations,” p. 186-187.

⁴³ Bela Fabian, “On the Impending Execution of 150 Young Hungarian Freedom Fighters under the Age of 18,” November 16, 1959, Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, HU OSA 398-0-1-7844.

⁴⁴ “Hungarians to Form Freedom Unit Here,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1957.

⁴⁵ “Hungarians to Form Freedom Unit Here.”

the United Nations (UN), exposing the Soviets' violations of the Warsaw Pact.⁴⁶ Later that same year, the HFFF wrote to the UN, requesting Western aid for Hungarian generals who faced charges for their roles in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.⁴⁷ The following year, the HFFF again addressed the UN, this time urging the group to refuse entrance to the new Soviet-imposed Hungarian government under Kadar.⁴⁸ They also urged the UN to send representatives to Hungary to supervise both the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the establishment of a new government.⁴⁹ The sustained political activism of members of the HFFF, an organization solely composed of former revolutionaries, underscores the desire of many former Hungarian freedom fighters to maintain close political ties to Hungary. Lobbying Western nations for support in establishing a democratic government and securing the freedom of political prisoners, those freedom fighters in the HFFF displayed a clear retention of the nationalist sympathies of their revolutionary days, despite their long-term resettlement in the U.S.

Community and Culture

The Hungarian freedom fighters also exhibited a distinct pattern of U.S. cultural adaptation. This cultural adaptation is well studied by legal scholars, often with divergent theses. Scholars such as Katalin Pintz suggest that most 1956 Hungarian immigrants retained a "strong sense of ethnic identity" after relocating to the U.S..⁵⁰ Conversely, scholar Steven Bela Vardy argues that the 1956 Hungarian refugees separated into distinct social groups after relocation to America.⁵¹ Some 1956 refugees settled near preexisting Hungarian communities and maintained past cultural traditions, but other 1956 refugees were more liberal and chose to settle outside of Hungarian American communities.⁵² By differentiating the freedom fighters as a distinct group, Henry Gleitman and Joseph Greenbaum offer a possible explanation for these conflicting arguments. These scholars analyzed the attitudes and personalities of male Hungarian refugees after the 1956 revolution, finding that those refugees who had fought in the revolution held more traditional values concerning family and

⁴⁶ "Statement by General Béla Király before the United Nations Special Committee on the Hungarian Revolution," February 1957, Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, HU OSA 398-0-1-8357.

⁴⁷ "Hungarian Freedom Federation to Mr. Alsing Anderson," December 14, 1957, Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

⁴⁸ Hungarian Freedom Fighters Federation, *Opinion Concerning the Representation of Hungary in the United Nations (Approval of Credentials)*, (New York: Hungarian Freedom Fighter, 1958), HU OSA 398-0-1-6192.

⁴⁹ Hungarian Freedom Fighters Federation, *Opinion Concerning the Representation of Hungary*.

⁵⁰ Pintz, "Hungarian Heritage Maintenance in the USA," p. 84-6.

⁵¹ Steven Bela Vardy, *The Hungarian Americans* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1985), p. 130-3.

⁵² Vardy, *The Hungarian Americans*, p. 130-3.

Hungarian culture.⁵³ While it is likely that many non-freedom fighters held traditional values, these findings suggest it is more apt to generalize about the 1956 freedom fighters as devoted to cultural maintenance than to assume this trend for all 1956 Hungarian refugees.

The traditional values of Hungarian freedom fighters translated into a devotion to preserving the culture of their past home.⁵⁴ This commitment is seen in interviews conducted by Columbia University with the 1956 Hungarian revolutionaries. One interview, “30-F”, recorded the opinions of a 19-year-old woman who served as a volunteer nurse during the Revolution. Because the United States dismissed Hungary during the Revolution, this refugee did not subscribe to her fellow Hungarians’ hope for Western aid.⁵⁵ Instead, she emphasized her desire that Hungarians would remain united, creating Hungarian cultural communities in the U.S. and learning skills to one day bring back to their home country.⁵⁶ Another interviewee labelled “11-F” displayed a similar desire to maintain Hungarian cultural traditions in the U.S. While, unlike “30-F”, she did find value in lobbying for Western help, she also articulated a desire to form U.S. communities devoted to preserving Hungarian culture, literature, and arts.⁵⁷ Just as the political activity of former freedom fighters is indicative of their love for their country and determination to preserve Hungarian culture in the face of Western assimilation, their expressed desire for community is likewise indicative of their love for their country and their determination to preserve Hungarian culture in the face of Western assimilation.

Despite many Hungarian freedom fighters’ desire to hold onto the culture of their past home, they were quickly introduced to American traditions and cultural norms after arriving in the U.S. This exposure to Western culture is evident in a 1956 newspaper article that details the introduction of early 1956 Hungarian refugees to American Thanksgiving. While most refugees were previously unaware of this holiday, they welcomed it warmly, eating turkey and “[giving] thanks for their escape to the west.”⁵⁸ This article has a clear Western bias, but it still offers evidence that the cultural adaptation of the Hungarian freedom fighters was not one-sided. While many refugees fostered their Hungarian

⁵³ Henry Gleitman and Joseph J. Greenbaum, “Attitudes and Personality Patterns of Hungarian Refugees,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 25: 3 (1961): p. 351.

⁵⁴ N.F. Dreisziger, “Towards a History of the Hungarian Communities of America,” *Hungarian Studies Review* 32: 1-2 (2005): p. 279-283.

⁵⁵ 30-F, “CURPH Interview 30-F with a 1956 Hungarian Refugee: 19 Years Old, Female, Nurse,” Interviewed by Pagdhorskzy, March 9, 1957, HU OSA 414-0-2-25, Donald and Vera Blinken Collection on Hungarian Refugees of 1956: Transcripts of Refugee Interviews; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, p. 5.

⁵⁶ 30-F, “CURPH Interview 30-F,” p. 46.

⁵⁷ 11-F, “CURPH Interview 11-F,” p. 49.

⁵⁸ Claire Cox, “Hungarian Refugees Learn all about American Thanksgiving – and Like it: Hungarian Refugees Observe Thanksgiving,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, Nov 23, 1956.

identity while in the U.S., they were still exposed to elements of American culture. A firsthand account of this exposure to unfamiliar customs, and the cultural conflict it created, is offered by a former freedom fighter under the pseudonym of Janos Hollo.⁵⁹ While he made connections in America through his hobby of sailing, Hollo still lamented that his friends in America could not understand his previous experiences and that he could not recognize daily expressions or slang.⁶⁰ Hollo was able to create close ties and adapt to a new life in the U.S., but he still viewed American culture as one separate from his own. This balance left Hollo and many other freedom fighters with an identity rooted in both Hungary and America.

In creating this distinct Hungarian American culture, many former freedom fighters chose to live near one another in previously established Hungarian enclaves. Those who did join a community actively involved in celebrating Hungarian cultural traditions. Scholar Tamas discusses one of the largest of these settlements, New Brunswick, New Jersey, where Hungarians had settled in large numbers since the end of the 19th century.⁶¹ It was here that over a thousand 1956 Hungarian refugees chose to settle, forming a community dedicated to maintaining a strong Hungarian identity while adapting to the greater U.S. social and economic framework.⁶² Cleveland, Ohio, also had an active Hungarian community, whose formation was facilitated by aid efforts such as the Hungarian Freedom Fund.⁶³ Tight-knit Hungarian communities in areas such as New Brunswick and Cleveland fostered the formation of organizations dedicated to the celebration and preservation of the Hungarian language, traditions, and history. In 1959, the American Hungarian Foundation (AHF) moved to Rutgers University in New Brunswick, serving as a bridge between those remaining in Hungary and those who moved to America.⁶⁴ Another active Hungarian organization in the U.S., The Hungarian Alumni Association, hosted Hungarian Saturday classes and launched a Hungarian oral history program called History Makers Testify.⁶⁵ The 1956 Hungarians in Cleveland established the Freedom Fighters Circle to create a school dedicated to teaching the Hungarian language.⁶⁶ They also established the Magyar Athletic Club, which offered facilities for athletic training.⁶⁷ Each of these organizations

⁵⁹ Janos Hollo, "A Freedom Fighter's Year of Freedom: A Hungarian Refugee Takes Stock of His New Way of Life and of His Progress in it. Freedom Fighter," *New York Times*, Nov 03, 1957.

⁶⁰ Hollo, "A Freedom Fighter's Year of Freedom."

⁶¹ Tamas, "Evolution of a Global Community," p. 617-8.

⁶² Tamas, "Evolution of a Global Community," p. 619-20.

⁶³ Susan Papp, *Hungarian Americans and Their Communities of Cleveland*, (Cleveland: MSL Academic Endeavors, 2010).

⁶⁴ Pintz, "Hungarian Heritage Maintenance in the USA," p. 86.

Pintz, "Hungarian Heritage Maintenance in the USA," p. 99.

⁶⁵ Pintz, "Hungarian Heritage Maintenance in the USA," p. 102-3.

⁶⁶ Papp, *Hungarian Americans and Their Communities of Cleveland*.

⁶⁷ Papp, *Hungarian Americans and Their Communities of Cleveland*.

allowed Hungarian freedom fighters to live in the United States while also forming communities to celebrate their home country's history and language.

To ensure the multi-generational preservation of Hungarian traditions, many Hungarian refugees who settled abroad enrolled their children in the Hungarian Scout Association Abroad. Through this group, Hungarian children celebrated their heritage, deepening their knowledge of Hungarian folk singing and dancing, folklore, history, and literature.⁶⁸ The interviews conducted by Columbia with 1956 Hungarian freedom fighters highlight the importance of language preservation to many of them. The former Hungarian freedom fighters labeled "74-F", "27-M", "11-F", and "35-M" each expressed a strong desire to teach their current or future children Hungarian, even if they permanently remained in the United States.⁶⁹ Their dedication to preserving the language of their home country reflects these refugees' determination to protect their cultural traditions for both themselves and future generations.

Education

Many former freedom fighters chose to use their resettlement in the United States to advance their education. Many refugees, regardless of their involvement in the revolution, focused on learning or improving their English in the United States. Organizations such as the Institute of International Education (IIE), the World University Service, and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations provided Hungarian refugees with scholarships for English classes.⁷⁰ Among younger refugees, this desire sometimes expanded into the pursuit of a full university education. Likely, many of the Hungarian refugees who enrolled in American Universities following their relocation were freedom fighters – the Hungarian Revolution began with protests by university students, and most freedom fighters were young adults. Mary Prime backs this assumption in her 1957 *New York Times* article, in which she estimates that most of the refugees who were students when fleeing from Hungary to the U.S. had also actively participated in the 1956 revolution.⁷¹ Using this connection, the actions and experiences of

⁶⁸ Dreisziger, "Towards a History of the Hungarian Communities of America," p. 279-83.

⁶⁹ 27-M, "CURPH Interview 27-M with a 1956 Hungarian Refugee: 26 Years Old, Male, Electronic engineer," Interviewed by Nyikos, 1957, Donald and Vera Blinken Collection on Hungarian Refugees of 1956: Transcripts of Refugee Interviews, Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest; 35-M, "CURPH Interview 35-M with a 1956 Hungarian Refugee: 20 Years Old, Male, Student," Interviewed by Reisch, April 17, 1957, Donald and Vera Blinken Collection on Hungarian Refugees of 1956: Transcripts of Refugee Interviews, Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, 1-6; 30-F, "CURPH Interview 30-F,"; 74-F, "CURPH Interview 74-F,"; 11-F, "CURPH Interview 11-F."

⁷⁰ Mary Prime, "Hungarian Students Fit U.S. College Life," *The Atlanta Constitution*, Sep 26, 1957.

⁷¹ Prime, "Hungarian Students Fit U.S. College Life."

Hungarian refugees who pursued education in the U.S. can provide insight into the adaptations of Hungarian freedom fighters.

Many Hungarian freedom fighters viewed pursuing an education in the United States as an opportunity to advance both their self-interests and those of their country. Such sentiments are clear in the Columbia interview with “27-M”, a 26-year-old Hungarian refugee who interrupted telephone and radio broadcasts during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. On the opportunities available to Hungarian refugees in the United States, this man notes, “Little Hungary has never had such a change, -- to gain by superior knowledge.”⁷² Due to the nationalization of Hungarian schools in 1948 by the Soviet communist government, many Hungarian revolutionaries faced immense difficulties in pursuing an education in Hungary.⁷³ Arriving in the United States, many Hungarian freedom fighters therefore saw pursuing an education as an opportunity previously unavailable to advance their personal career goals and the political and economic interests of Hungary. Through this perspective, education did not lead to faster acculturation among the freedom fighters, as Weinstock found to be true of the general 1956 Hungarian refugee population.⁷⁴ Instead, these freedom fighters uniquely used education as a tool through which to keep alive the political activism of their revolutionary days.

The Hungarian refugees who pursued an education in the U.S. exhibited their sustained interest in Hungary by forming student organizations dedicated to the cause of the 1956 revolution. In 1957, students formed the Association of Hungarian Students in North America (AHSNA), which joined with the International Union of Free Hungarian Students (UFHS) to regularly publish a periodical called the *Magyar diak* (The Hungarian Student).⁷⁵ At Rutgers University, 1956 freedom fighters founded a student organization focused on spreading information on the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and the Hungarian Alumni Association focused on preserving elements of the Hungarian language and culture abroad.⁷⁶ Evidence of the immense political activity of these Hungarian students is found in letters written by the Association of Hungarian Students in the U.S. In 1958, this organization wrote to the General Assembly’s Special Committee on Hungary of the United Nations, asking for aid for those still in Hungary and calling for UN intervention on behalf of those Hungarians

⁷² 27-M, “CURPH Interview 27-M with a 1956 Hungarian Refugee: 26 Years Old, Male, Electronic engineer,” Interviewed by Nyikos, 1957, HU OSA 414-0-2-21, Donald and Vera Blinken Collection on Hungarian Refugees of 1956: Transcripts of Refugee Interviews; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest, p. 51.

⁷³ Vera Sheridan, “Support and Surveillance: 1956 Hungarian Refugee Students in Transit to the Joyce Kilmer Reception Center and to Higher Education Scholarships in the USA,” *History of Education* 45: 6 (2016), p. 778-9.

⁷⁴ Weinstock, *Acculturation and Occupation*, p. 66-7.

⁷⁵ Sheridan, “Support and Surveillance,” p. 789.

⁷⁶ Pintz, “Hungarian Heritage Maintenance in the USA,” p. 83-111.

currently facing death sentences.⁷⁷ This letter serves as evidence that the Hungarian students in the U.S., most of whom were likely former freedom fighters, remained intimately tied to the fate of their home country. Despite relocating to the U.S., these students were able to use education to advance Hungary's political interests.

Economic Adaptation

Regardless of their political, cultural, or educational involvement after settling in the United States, most 1956 Hungarian refugees rapidly rooted themselves in the American economy. At Camp Kilmer, the National Academy of Sciences collaborated with the President's Committee for Hungarian Refugee Relief and the American Council for Emigrees in the Professions to find job opportunities for Hungarian refugees which met their needs and skills.⁷⁸ Evidence of the relative success of these efforts is seen in the rapid and widespread employment of most 1956 Hungarian refugees. A survey conducted in 1967 by the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA) on the resettlement of Jewish Hungarian refugees in New York City found that around two-thirds of those surveyed had established themselves in the city within 4 months.⁷⁹ A decade later, almost 100% of those surveyed were self-supported.⁸⁰ While this survey focused only on Jewish Hungarian refugees, similar figures were seen across all 1956 Hungarian refugees. By 1957, an estimated 65.7% of Hungarian refugees in the United States were employed.⁸¹ These statistics speak to how most 1956 Hungarian refugees quickly rooted themselves within the United States' economic framework, regardless of their previous revolutionary involvement.

Focusing on the economic adaptation of only former freedom fighters, a few former Hungarian revolutionaries proved to be exceptions to this trend of prosperity. This was especially true for younger refugees, many of whom were separated from family members who were refused entrance into the United States.⁸² Other young former freedom fighters struggled to justify the economic comforts of America against the reality of Hungary's current state. A 1957 *New York Times* article

⁷⁷ Association of Hungarian Students in the U.S., "Memorandum," January 1957, in Records of the UN Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary: UN Documents, Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

⁷⁸ "Jobs for Hungarian Refugees," *Science* 125:3240 (1957): p. 187.

⁷⁹ Philip Soskis, "The Adjustment of Hungarian Refugees in New York," *The International Migration Review* 2:1 (1967), 41-4.

⁸⁰ Soskis, "The Adjustment of Hungarian Refugees in New York," p. 41-4.

⁸¹ Gustztáz Kecskés, "A Cold War Humanitarian Action: The Western Admission of 1956 Hungarian Refugees," *Hungarian Historical Review* 11: 4 (2022), p. 920-1.

⁸² Harrison Salisbury, "Hungarian Refugees Blend Easily into U.S. Way of Life: 23-Year-Old Heroine has Become a Model Housewife," *New York Times*, Mar 24, 1957.

quoted one young refugee at Camp Kilmer as stating that he was ashamed of the comforts that he experienced in America.⁸³ Complete economic destitution was rare, but a select few freedom fighters and general 1956 Hungarian refugees failed to reestablish their lives in the U.S economically. Due to an economic recession, an estimated 200 to 800 of the 2,000 Hungarian refugees in Cleveland, Ohio, were unemployed by July of 1958.⁸⁴ This economic devastation was so great that many Hungarian refugees decided to return to Hungary. On this decision, one Hungarian refugee stated, "I can't beg. I can't ask people for money. I'll go back to Hungary. Sure. I'll sit in prison for six months. But then it will be all over."⁸⁵ Similar levels of economic destitution were seen among three Hungarian freedom fighters who were arrested in Los Angeles in 1958 for theft. According to a Los Angeles Times article, these former revolutionaries stole \$30,000 worth of items to pay off their car, furniture, and eventual schooling in the United States.⁸⁶ While the economic struggles of these former Hungarian refugees were not common, their experiences highlight that economic destitution was a rare but present reality for both freedom fighters and other 1956 Hungarian refugees.

Exceptions

Adaptation trends seen among the 1956 Hungarian freedom fighters are also qualified by the few former revolutionaries who chose to let go of their Hungarian identity after resettling in the United States. The Columbia interview with a former Hungarian revolutionary labelled "17-M" reflects the rarity, but existence, of such sentiments. This Hungarian refugee, while repeatedly emphasizing his profound pride in his home country and his desire for the West to view Hungarians positively, expressed no desire to retain his Hungarian identity after relocating to the United States. This refugee also expressed no desire to pass his native language to his children or to return to Hungary.⁸⁷ While such sentiments appear to be in the minority amongst the 1956 Hungarian freedom fighters, they do highlight that adaptation was not homogeneous even amongst them. While most former freedom fighters strongly desired to maintain Hungary's culture and political interests after resettlement, some revolutionaries did not carry their cause to the United States.

Conclusion

Viewing the economic failure or cultural rejection of the 1956 Hungarian freedom fighters as an anomaly, the general cultural and political preservation of this group in the United States illustrates

⁸³ Harrison Salisbury, "Recession Hurts Hungarian Refugees."

⁸⁴ Harrison Salisbury, "Recession Hurts Hungarian Refugees."

⁸⁵ Harrison Salisbury, "Recession Hurts Hungarian Refugees."

⁸⁶ "3 Ex-Freedom Fighters Arrested in Burglaries: Hungarians Tell of Wanting Money for Car, Furniture Payments, School Fees," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), October 13, 1958.

⁸⁷ 17-M, "CURPH Interview 17-M," p. 1-9.

that they largely formed what Peter Pastor calls a distinct Hungarian American “dual identity” following their resettlement. The Hungarian freedom fighters did not merely melt into the culture of the United States but also retained aspects of their Hungarian culture and sympathies.⁸⁸ This dual identity is demonstrated in a 1976 *New York Times* article, which reflected on the adaptation of five former Hungarian refugees, four of whom had fought in the Hungarian Revolution. One of these former freedom fighters is quoted as stating, “From a material point of view, I made out very well, but emotionally I’m still homesick after 20 years. People ask me if I’m Hungarian now or American. I tell them I’m a 200 percent person – 100 percent American and 100 percent Hungarian.”⁸⁹ Despite successfully establishing themselves in the United States and even becoming valued members of their surrounding communities, this quote illustrates that adaptation is not synonymous with assimilation. These refugees started new lives in the U.S., but they held tightly to their culture and to a desire for change in Hungary. Many Hungarian freedom fighters also expressed a strong desire to return to Hungary if the country’s political situation changed. As one Hungarian couple remarked in a 1957 *Chicago Tribune* article, “It is harder to move the heart, than one at first believes.”⁹⁰ Regardless of their level of economic or social integration, the love many Hungarian revolutionaries held for their past home was never smothered by relocation to the United States. Hoping to one day return home, celebrate their cultural traditions, and lobby for Western aid for Hungary, these refugees built new lives in the United States without losing sight of the revolutionary ideas that had initially forced their flight.

While analysis of the adaptation of the 1956 Hungarian freedom fighters illustrates the Hungarian American identity previously described by Peter Pastor in his 2016 work, the distinct adaptation of this group also offers a fresh critique of the idea of the American “melting pot.” This theory assumes that immigrant waves in the United States homogenized into a singular American cultural identity, and it has retained influence on modern discussions of American immigration despite the presence of strong critique since the turn of the 20th century.⁹¹ The freedom fighters’ retention of their former Hungarian traditions and the creation of communities through which to celebrate and share their heritage provide new evidence of the insufficiency of the melting pot theory. This support is critical as scholars continue to debate the proper means through which to view immigrants’ adaptation, and more significantly, as they advance theories such as segmented assimilation, which

⁸⁸ Pastor, “The American Reception and Settlement,” p. 197-205.

⁸⁹ Michael Knight, “The Refugees from Hungary 20 Years Later: The Refugees 20 Years Later,” *New York Times*, December 31, 1976.

⁹⁰ Russell Freeburg, “Hungarian Refugees Fit Well in New Land: Troops on Guard Hungarians Fit Proudly Into Their New Land Refugees show Gains Year After Revolt Hospital Duty,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963), October 23, 1957.

⁹¹ Heike Paul, “E Pluribus Unum?: The Myth of the Melting Pot,” In *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*, p. 274.

analyze how differences in ethnicity, religion, and affiliation impact the manner and speed at which immigrants form new lives in the United States.⁹²

This paper's more nuanced understanding of the adaptation of the 1956 Hungarian freedom fighters to the United States also uncovers many of the political motivations underlying the West's overgeneralized portrayal of this refugee group's adaptation. With the United States welcoming these Hungarian refugees amidst the global conflict of the Cold War, there was immense pressure on the country to successfully accommodate those refugees, seen as running from the communist tyrannical system of the Soviet Union. Resettling the Hungarian refugees, the U.S. was effectively supporting a nation which had stood against the Soviet Union. Acknowledging that most refugees were not freedom fighters or that many freedom fighters did not fully assimilate into life in the United States would therefore have been an acknowledgement of weaknesses, which undermined the United States' global standing.

⁹² Sebahattin Ziyank, "Critically Assessing Classic Assimilation Theory and Alternative Perspectives for Immigrants and the Second Generation in the United States," *Race, Gender & Class* 22, no. 1-2 (2015): 143-49; Chris Lee, "Sociological Theories of Immigration: Pathways to Integration for U.S. Immigrants," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 19 (6): p. 732-3.