

## THE 1956 REFUGEES AND SOCIAL TRUST IN AUSTRALIA

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### *Abstract*

*The first Hungarian arrived in Australia as a convict in the 1820s. The first political refugees were the soldiers of 1848, who arrived in gold-fevered Victoria hoping for a new life. The first humanitarian refugees from Hungary landed in Sydney and Melbourne before the start of World War II. They quickly integrated into Australian society, but they were few in number and did not form separate groups. The two largest waves of Hungarian refugees – cc. 15,000 people each – arrived in the country in the late 1940s and after 1956. There were many of them, and they tried to stay together and establish their own Hungarian communities and institutions in every major city. Some Australians did not look kindly on this, and it took a long time for both sides to accept each other. This presentation, linked to the anniversary of the 1956 revolution, shows the integration process of the 1956 refugees, based on contemporary press articles.*

**Key words:** Australia, 1956 revolution, Hungarians, humanitarian refugees, social integration

### **INTRODUCTION**

The topic of my study is the Hungarian refugees of 1956 and their social reception in Australia. Many of you have probably heard of the water polo match that became famous as the „Blood bath in Melbourne”. Perhaps some of you have also seen the film commemorating the Hungarian Soviet match, entitled Children of Glory (Endre Domaniczky, 2021, p. 349),<sup>1</sup> which was made for the 50th anniversary of

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<sup>1</sup> Endre Domaniczky: *On Borderline Areas*, p. 349 Ferenc Mádl Institute of Comparative Law, Budapest, 2021

the 1956 Hungarian uprising. One of the most famous matches in the history of international water polo took place in Melbourne, Australia, in the winter of 1956. In Budapest, it was impossible to know in advance whether the Hungarian Olympic team would be able to compete in the Olympic Games, as the revolution broke out on October 23, 1956, and the following two weeks changed not only history but also the personal stories of many players. One of them, Dezső Gyarmati, for example, built a barricade in Széna Square before the team's departure (*Dezső Gyarmati on 1956*, 2025).<sup>2</sup> Almost miraculously, the water polo team made it to the venue in Melbourne.

## **I. THE REVOLUTION**

The 1956 revolution was a consequence of the communist takeover. The Stalinist dictatorship led by Mátyás Rákosi was accompanied by misguided economic policies that brought poverty to the country. Political terror caused serious tension in all social strata. After Stalin's death, Imre Nagy's reform program and then Hegedűs's premiership increasingly pushed the dissatisfied intellectual class toward revolution. Rákosi's weakening created the possibility of domestic resistance, and then the workers' uprising in Poznań, Poland, provided a direct example for the Hungarians. In 1955, the Soviet army withdrew from Hungary's western neighbour, Austria, where Soviet troops had been stationed for ten years, and the country's international neutrality was guaranteed (*Tamás M. Tarján*, 1955).<sup>3</sup> So the rebels had another example of how it was possible to return to the international community from the Soviet sphere of influence.

The outbreak of the revolution almost derailed the swimmers' trip, but they finally arrived in Melbourne just before the opening of the Olympics, after stopping in several cities along the way. When they left Budapest, it still seemed that the revolution would prevail, but by the time they arrived in Australia, they knew that Soviet troops had marched into Hungary. In Melbourne, according to newspaper reports, a thousand local Hungarians welcomed the Hungarian Olympic team with bouquets of flowers and Hungarian flags with black ribbons.<sup>4</sup> The match known as the „Blood bath in Melbourne” was played between the Hungarian and Soviet teams

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<sup>2</sup> Dezső Gyarmati on 1956: “*I Listened to My Heart, Not My Mind*” (source accessed as of 8 November, 2025) <https://magyaredzo.hu/gyarmati-dezso-1956-rol-a-szivemre-s-nem-az-eszemre-hallgattam/>

<sup>3</sup> Tamás M. Tarján: „Austria Joins the Ranks of Neutral States” <https://rubicon.hu/hu/kalendarium/1955-oktober-26-semleges-allamok#:~:text=Austria%20joins%20the%20ranks%20of%20neutral%20states%20in%201955.> (source accessed as of 8 November, 2025)

<sup>4</sup> The Canberra Times (Public issue range: 1926–1995) Monday, 12 November 1956 – page 2 “Special instructions regarding the Hungarian flag.”

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on December 6. It was only the semifinal (the Hungarians played the Yugoslavs in the final), but due to the huge interest and bloody finale, it is still considered the most important event of the Melbourne Olympics.

During the violent match, the Hungarian team's star player, Ervin Zádor, was hit hard by one of the Russian players. The water turned red with the Hungarian player's blood. Due to the huge outcry, the match had to be called off before it ended, but the Hungarians won 4-0.

The match, which has since become a historic milestone in sports history, along with the events unfolding in Hungary, became a defining turning point in Australian Hungarian diplomatic relations. The events in Hungary made headlines in the international press. The solidarity and humanitarian assistance shown on the global stage offered a helping hand to Hungarian refugees even in the most distant parts of the world. It is not my aim to analyse the historical events and their causal connections; interested readers can find this in the work of numerous excellent researchers.<sup>5</sup>

This study focuses on the events, social processes, and dynamics within Australian society that were triggered by the mass arrival of Hungarian refugees. The Hungarian Olympic team in Melbourne was supported by a strong local Hungarian community and the Australian federal state. As a result, some of the athletes and their entourage did not return to Hungary but remained in Australia. During the suppression of the 1956 revolution, more than 2,500 Hungarians and about 750 Soviet soldiers died.<sup>6</sup> In several waves, around 200,000 people left Hungary, most of them via Austria, which placed a huge burden on the small Alpine country. The most of the refugees, around 180,000 people, later travelled on to other countries. Several thousand of them eventually settled in Australia.

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<sup>5</sup> Among the analyses produced on the topic, I would highlight the following: Kecskés, D. Gusztáv, “*Global: Humanitarian Action during the Cold War. The International Reception of the 1956 Hungarian Refugees*”, *Hungarian Science*, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Press, Budapest, 2023, Vol. 184, Issue 2, p. 212. ([https://mersz.hu/dokumentum/matud202302\\_14/](https://mersz.hu/dokumentum/matud202302_14/))

<sup>6</sup> Based on data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office – Press Room: Statements and Briefings, 24 October 2017, “*Victims of the 23 October Revolution and War of Independence – details from a once classified document*”). [https://www.ksh.hu/sajtoszoba\\_kozlemenyek\\_tajekoztatok\\_2017\\_10\\_24](https://www.ksh.hu/sajtoszoba_kozlemenyek_tajekoztatok_2017_10_24) (source accessed as of 8 November, 2025)

## **II. THE FIRST IMMIGRANTS**

It is important to emphasize that they were not the first Hungarian immigrants to Australia (*Endre Domaniczky, 2017, p.18*).<sup>7</sup> The first Hungarian arrived on the continent as a convict in the 1820s. The first large group of Hungarians were Hungarian soldiers from 1848 who travelled to Australia in the early 1850s, attracted by news of the Victorian gold rush. Although Hungarians continued to arrive in the second half of the 19th century, the community remained small, with a maximum of 2,000 people, until the outbreak of World War II. In addition, Hungarians tended to scatter throughout the country in every wave of immigration. The first phase of Hungarian immigration, between 1830 and 1939, is often referred to in historical writings as the "era of scattered immigration." In 1939, however, approximately 800 Hungarians arrived in Sydney and Melbourne. They sensed the coming of the world war, and Australia accepted them as humanitarian refugees. They marked the beginning of the second phase of Hungarian immigration, the "era of mass immigration," which lasted until 1990. Within this period, several waves of Hungarians arrived from Hungary and neighbouring countries. The two largest waves were in the second half of the 1940s and in 1956. Both waves brought 15,000 people each, for a total of about 30,000 people arriving in Australia (*Endre Domaniczky, 2017, p. 18*).<sup>8</sup>

## **III. AUSTRALIA RECEIVING THE NEW IMMIGRANTS**

Mass immigration was based on the experiences of Australians during World War II, when the country lived under the threat of Japanese invasion for years. At the end of the war, the government believed that population growth should be accelerated by increasing immigration. Everything was planned, and after too few British arrived, they gradually began to admit Central Europeans as well. To help them integrate more easily, the immigrants were given new names: they became the new Australians. By then, Central European refugees had already been living in camps in various Western European countries for years. They arrived slowly, over a period of years, and had to spend a shorter or longer period of time in camps here before they could start their new lives. They usually had to sign a

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<sup>7</sup> Endre Domaniczky: "The Hungarian Diaspora in Australia in the 20th Century," *Jogtörténeti Szemle* 2017/3. p. 18.

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two-year compulsory work contract before they could stand on their own two feet (*Endre Domaniczky, 2017, p. 19*).<sup>9</sup>

The locals quickly grew fond of the Hungarians. They did not complain, but worked hard, learned quickly, and wanted to integrate into mainstream society as soon as possible. The first large wave continued to work for years after their two-year work contracts expired, before finally obtaining Australian citizenship in the mid-1950s. They participated in every government project, building dams and bridges. By the time they had successfully integrated, the revolution broke out in Hungary, and new refugees, the 1956ers, arrived. Due to their previous positive experiences, the Australians welcomed the 1956ers as well (*Endre Domaniczky, 2018, p. 319*).<sup>10</sup> Compared to other countries, they may have received less help here, but, for example, the two-year work contract no longer applied to them. The Australian government, sympathizing with the Hungarians, raised the quota relatively quickly, from 3,000 to 10,000. Hungarians from other countries later joined them, so we can ultimately speak of 15,000 Hungarians in this wave (*Endre Domaniczky, 2020, p. 517–518*).<sup>11</sup>

The Australian Government responded swiftly to the humanitarian crisis, and by increasing its quota, it became the third-largest host country among Western nations, after the United States and Canada. Despite the easier immigration conditions, tensions quickly grew within Australian society and the Hungarian diaspora. On the one hand, there were enough people from 1956 to appear in every Hungarian organization and represent their views, but they were not enough to completely take over these organizations. In many cases, not only their age and social composition differed from those who had arrived earlier, but also their outlook, which is understandable, since the 1956ers had lived at home for more than a decade under a dictatorship and had different experiences and ideas about the past

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<sup>9</sup> Endre Domaniczky: “The Hungarian Diaspora in Australia in the 20th Century,” *Jogtörténeti Szemle* 2017/3. p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> “The arrival of the '56 refugees were organized in every respect. Australia welcomed and assisted them, and by the time they arrived, Hungarian organizations were already present in every major city. The large number of '56 refugees, their relatively homogeneous experiences, and their different settlement patterns influenced the establishment of their own organizations.”

Endre Domaniczky, *Australia through Hungarian Eyes*, Fakultás Publishing, Budapest, 2018, p. 319 (source accessed as of 4 December, 2025)  
<https://vmek.oszk.hu/22700/22722/22722.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Endre Domaniczky, *Australia through Hungarian Eyes: From Penal Settlement to a Multicultural Commonwealth*, Budapest: Fakultás Publishing House, 2020, pp. 517–518. (source accessed as of 4 December, 2025)  
<https://mek.oszk.hu/22700/22722/>

and the future than those who had arrived earlier. It was not uncommon for their expectations to be different as well. While those who arrived in the 1940s took on any job they could find, as they had no other options, some of the freedom fighters were dissatisfied with both the job opportunities and the general standard of living. They were not always willing to learn English, they considered their wages to be too low, and they thought that working conditions and healthcare were worse than in Hungary. In addition to English-language newspapers, the Hungarian press in Australia also regularly reported on the difficulties in the period after 1956.

The August 14, 1957, issue of The Tribune (Sydney, New South Wales) draws attention to the following problem:

„Planning unemployment” (AWU leader accuses Menzies Govt.)

Sydney: „They are deliberately setting out to fill the country with a surplus of unemployed, and they don’t care what happens to them.”

The NSW secretary of the Australian Workers’ Union, Mr. C. Oliver, made this charge against the Menzies Government.

Mr. Oliver had been phoned by Tribune about the boasts of Mr. Holt (Menzies’ Minister for Labor and formerly Immigration Minister) that the Government would maintain mass immigration, including 5,000 more Hungarians.

„Of course, Mr. Holt is not unhappy about the growing unemployment.”

Mr. Oliver said „He knows that there is a lot of unemployment on the racefields, and that a lot of Hungarians have been living in camps without jobs for months.

Holt’s announcement of plans to bring in 5000 more Hungarians was made when there were already 1600 unemployed Hungarians at Bonegilla<sup>12</sup> (VIC) and Greta (NSW) camps alone. Other were walking the streets...”<sup>13</sup>

Holt’s own Employment officers say that despite systematic canvassing of employers, they find Hungarians „hard to place”.

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<sup>12</sup> For the first time, Endre Domaniczky, as consul, officially contacted the management of the Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre in 2013, with the aim of initiating work to uncover the memories of the Hungarian arrivals at the camp. (On Borderline Areas, p. 352)

<sup>13</sup> “The provision, onward transport, and settlement of the approximately 200,000 Hungarian refugees of 1956 was an extraordinary success in international refugee assistance, in which the institutions of the UN family—particularly the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—played a prominent role.” Kecskés, D. Gusztáv, The UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Legal Protection of the 1956 Hungarian Refugees, State and Legal Science, Vol. LXII, 2021, Issue 2, pp. 55–83. (source accessed as of 8 November 2025)

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In the face of realities, the mass immigration program puts intolerable extra strain on our already twisted economy and means suffering both for old Australians and migrants.”<sup>14</sup>

In one article, we read that an elderly man who had had a good job in Hungary complained to the newspaper interviewing him three months after his arrival: “I came to Australia because I heard that the mountains here are made of gold. I went to the employment centre, but there was no work there. I went to fifty factories, but they said they were sorry, they could only give jobs to Australians, not refugees. So, I ended up getting a job as a street sweeper, but I didn't come to Australia to be a street sweeper. In Hungary, I was a senior executive in a large cooperative, and I had a secure job for the rest of my life. I felt secure. I had a three-room apartment. I didn't give all that up to become a street sweeper. I feel like I was deceived when they told me I could come here. I survived Hitler, the Horthy regime, and now I feel deceived. I'm going home because Australia is a good country, but Hungary is even better.”

Another newspaper reported that more than 1,500 Hungarians were waiting for the plane arriving in Sydney from Austria, which carried 83 refugees. The crowd at the airport cheered wildly and sang the Hungarian national anthem. Some knelt on the ground and wept, not knowing if their relatives were on the plane. The immigration minister announced that the original quota of 3,000 would be increased by another 2,000, and that priority would be given to those who already have relatives in Australia. A third newspaper wrote that the Hungarians were not welcome at first and advised the refugees not to bring their quarrels and disputes from Europe with them. Other articles mentioned Hungarians who returned to Europe because of homesickness and difficulties integrating, but there were also those who decided to return home because of their lack of English language skills.

There was even a newspaper article about Hungarian refugees whose former colleagues at a tractor factory in Hungary had collected money to pay for their plane tickets. It is also worth quoting an article from the Hungarian press in Australia, which states that Hungarian refugees flooded into Western countries too quickly, causing discontent among the population in several countries and tensions in the labour market.

#### CONCLUSIONS

*In summary, it can be said that the governments and populations of Western countries welcomed Hungarian refugees with sympathy, but their arrival in large groups within a short period of time often caused dissatisfaction among the local population and, in many cases, among the newly arrived Hungarian refugees*

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<sup>14</sup> Tribune (Sydney, NSW) 14 August. 1957, p. 12.

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*themselves. In the years following their arrival, many decided to return to Europe or Hungary, usually due to a lack of job opportunities or language skills. However, the majority of those who arrived in 1956 successfully integrated and became useful citizens of their new homeland.*

*Next year, we will commemorate the 70th anniversary of the 1956 Revolution. In connection with the anniversary, I would like to draw attention to the international cooperation that offered a helping hand to the refugees of the 1956 Revolution.*

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