

Cold War HISTORY



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To cite this article: Emmanuel Comte (2020): Waging the Cold War: the origins and launch of Western cooperation to absorb migrants from Eastern Europe, 1948–57, Cold War History, DOI: [10.1080/14682745.2020.1756781](https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2020.1756781)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2020.1756781>



Published online: 22 May 2020.



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Waging the Cold War: the origins and launch of Western cooperation to absorb migrants from Eastern Europe, 1948–57

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ABSTRACT

This article reconstructs the gradual process leading the Western powers to cooperate to absorb migrants from Eastern Europe, from the February 1948 Czechoslovak coup d'état to the 1956–57 Hungarian crisis. This study reveals that cooperation to manage migration became a major component of Western Cold War strategy. Centred on the German predicament, it was first a way to contain the Soviet Union by reducing the pressures affecting Western countries bordering Eastern Europe. It also became an offensive strategy aiming at encouraging outflows from Eastern Europe to weaken Communist governments. Only cooperation at a Western level could achieve those objectives.

KEYWORDS

Cold War; migration; ICEM; Hungarian crisis; refugees

1. Introduction

East-West migration in Europe was a major aspect of the Cold War. At the end of this struggle the Berlin Wall – constructed to halt emigration – broke under the pressure of the outflow of people from Eastern Europe. A closer look at this question in the first years of the Cold War provides interesting insights. After emigration in the East increased in the wake of the February 1948 Communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia and the creation of the German Democratic Republic in October 1949, the Western powers gradually came to recognise the importance of cooperating on migration.¹ They used existing Western organisations, but also broader organisations if their actions could be aligned with Western interests.² To reinforce their cooperation, they built one additional Western organisation in November 1951: the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM).³ When the Hungarian crisis broke out on 4 November

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¹The Western powers' or 'the West' refer to the United States, the member countries of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), Australia, and Canada. 'East European countries' or 'the East' refer to the Soviet Union and the people's democracies of central Europe. Both groupings acquired greater cohesion with the creation of the OEEC, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) in 1948–49.

²Western organisations included the OEEC and the Council of Europe. Broader organisations were the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

³For previous studies on these organisations: Jérôme Elie, "The Historical Roots of Cooperation between the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration," *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organisations* 16, no. 3 (July 2010); and Lina Venturas, ed., *International 'Migration Management' in the Early Cold War: The Inter-Governmental Committee for European Migration* (Corinth: University of the Peloponnese, 2015).

1956, the Western powers had fully articulated their cooperation. That achievement helped them swiftly absorb nearly 200,000 Hungarian emigrants from November 1956 to March 1957.⁴

This article relies on primary documents from all the international organisations involved in these episodes as well as from three major migratory actors: the United States, West Germany, and France. Secondary sources on various aspects of this history have helped complete and connect the primary material throughout. This first comprehensive reconstruction of the origins and launch of Western cooperation to absorb migrants from Eastern Europe reveals that migration management became a major component of Western Cold War strategy – against the backdrop of this issue remaining largely ignored in grand narratives of the Cold War.⁵ As we will see, this point is significant for our understanding of the Cold War in four directions. First, through this study, we will find out that Western migration management focused on Germany – definitely the most important stake in the Cold War.⁶ Second, we will detail how migration management was a major instrument for containment. By cooperating on migrants from Eastern Europe, the Western powers aimed to stabilise West Germany and other countries bordering Eastern Europe so as to contain the Soviet Union. Third, we will notice that migration was an area in which the Western powers went beyond containment and developed an offensive strategy. By absorbing migrants from the East, the Western powers imposed real costs on Communist governments, reducing their labour force and creating imbalances between young and old, skilled and unskilled workers.⁷ Last, but not least, this analysis of migration management in early Cold War Europe will reveal that success derived from the cooperation between the Western powers, rather than from isolated US action.⁸ These various facets converged in the resettlement of Hungarian emigrants in 1956–57: the Western response to Soviet repression. It was no sudden move of sympathy, but the culmination of a progressive effort of cooperation at a Western level.⁹

All this we will explore by following the consecutive functional steps of this history: the increase in the East-West flow; the factors gradually driving the Western powers to

⁴D. Gusztáv Kecskés, “Les Composantes d’une action humanitaire hors du commun: L’Accueil en Occident des réfugiés hongrois de 1956,” *Relations internationales* 172, no. 4 (2017): 128.

⁵For previous connections between immigration from the East and the Cold War: Kim Salomon, “The Cold War Heritage: UNRRA and the IRO as Predecessors of UNHCR,” in *The Uprooted: Forced Migration as an International Problem in the Post-War Era*, ed. Göran Rystad (Lund: Lund University Press, 1990), 172; and K. Salomon, *Refugees in the Cold War: Toward a New International Refugee Regime in the Early Postwar Era* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1991), 245.

⁶On the role of Germany in the Cold War: Carolyn Woods Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 488; Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–63* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 105. For an emphasis on Italian migrants: Marina Maccari Clayton, “‘Communists of the Stomach’: Italian Migration and International Relations in the Cold War Era,” *Studi emigrazione*, no. 155 (2004); and Venturas, ed., *International Migration Management*, 44–5, 187.

⁷For propaganda or intelligence objectives: Salomon, “The Cold War Heritage,” 167; Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics: A Perilous Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 54; Emma Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society: Between Sovereigns* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 138–43; Susan Lisa Carruthers, *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); and Venturas, ed., *International Migration Management*, 51, 178, 317, 320, 325.

⁸For US policies: Göran Rystad, “Victims of Oppression or Ideological Weapons? Aspects of U.S. Refugee Policy in the Postwar Era,” in *The Uprooted*; ed., G. Rystad, Carl Joseph Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees During the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Carruthers, *Cold War Captives*.

⁹Gerard Daniel Cohen, *In War’s Wake: Europe’s Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 158; and Kecskés, “Les Composantes d’une action humanitaire.”

cooperate; the definition and use of instruments at the Western and West European levels; and finally the response to the Hungarian crisis.

2. Increased immigration from the East

From 1948 onwards, immigration from the East increased in Europe. In the months after the February Communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia, 50,000 emigrated to the West.¹⁰ Germany was the fulcrum of the East-West migration system in Cold War Europe. With the creation of the German Democratic Republic in October 1949, more than 129,000 left East Germany that year. In 1950, the outflow increased by 50% to 192,000. In 1953, it reached 330,000.¹¹ Overall, from 1949 to the late 1950s, 2.5 million arrived in West Germany from East Germany.¹² Even though West Germany was the main destination, immigration from the East also affected Austria, Italy, and Greece: the other 'Western border countries'. In December 1951, Greek diplomats informed their Western counterparts that dozens of thousands of migrants from Communist countries had arrived in Greece 'by reason of its geographical position and against its will'.¹³ The Council of Europe – set up in 1949 to promote cooperation among West European countries – claimed a lower figure, but still recognised a significant inflow into Greece.¹⁴

The factors driving these migrants westwards were hardly ideological. According to historian Volker Ackermann, 1% of those from East Germany departed for ideological reasons.¹⁵ The majority left for economic reasons.¹⁶ East-West migration was a structural flow in the European economy. As historian Patrick Major recalls about Germany, population movements 'followed an East-West pattern, between an underdeveloped agrarian East and an urbanising West'.¹⁷ In addition, Germans were then highly mobile, which amplified this structural pattern. In 1949, 25% of East Germans were newcomers and therefore mobile.¹⁸ They were national Germans – who had recently fled the lost German territories east of the Oder-Neisse line – or ethnic Germans – people of German ancestry and culturally German who had fled central European countries at the end of the war.¹⁹

¹⁰Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society*, 139–43.

¹¹Michel Hubert, "La Population allemande: ruptures et continuités," in *Allemagne 1945–61: De la catastrophe à la construction du Mur*, ed. Jean-Paul Cahn and Ulrich Pfeil (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2008), 84.

¹²Patrick Major, "Going West: The Open Border and the Problem of Republikflucht," in *The Workers' and Peasants' State: Communism and Society in East Germany under Ulbricht, 1945–71*, ed. Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 191.

¹³'Summary record of the 3rd meeting,' Brussels Migration Conference, MCB/SR/3, 23-4, 20 December 1951, National Archives Records Administration, Washington DC (henceforth 'NARA'): quoted in Venturas, ed., *International Migration Management*, 224.

¹⁴Report from the Special Representative of the Council of Europe for national refugees and overpopulation to the Committee of Ministers, Consultative Assembly, 7th ordinary session, Doc. 331, 10 February 1955, Archives of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, <https://publicsearch.coe.int> accessed 9 May 2019 (henceforth 'ACE').

¹⁵Volker Ackermann, "Politische Flüchtlinge oder unpolitische Zuwanderer aus der DDR? Die Debatte um den echten Flüchtling in Westdeutschland von 1945 bis 1961," in *50 Jahre Bundesrepublik – 50 Jahre Einwanderung: Nachkriegsgeschichte als Migrationsgeschichte*, ed. Jan Motte, Rainer Ohliger, and Anne von Oswald (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1999), 85.

¹⁶Salomon, *Refugees in the Cold War*, 85–6.

¹⁷Major, "Going West," 197.

¹⁸Volker Ackermann, "Migration in Deutschland 1945–55," in *Rückkehr aus der Emigration nach 1945*, ed. Wolfgang Blaschke, Karola Fings, and Cordula Lissner (Cologne: Verein EL-DE-Haus Köln, 1997), 17.

¹⁹Ian Connor, *Refugees and Expellees in Post-War Germany* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 190.