

## The Domestic Political Intersections of the South African Community’s “Expression of Solidarity” with the Hungarian Refugee Crisis, 1956–1957

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### Abstract:

The violent repression of the Hungarian revolution by the Soviet military forces during October–November 1956 turned four per cent (4%) of the national population into refugees needing social relief from distress and a new home. While some countries condemned Soviet aggression and refused recognition to the successor government installed by the occupational forces, others rendered a mass assistance program and granted temporary and permanent asylum to the victims. The Union of South Africa, fiercely anti-communist in its orientation, actively participated and fully supported the international relief effort, supposedly as an expression of its commitment to human rights, freedom, and democracy. South Africa offered, among other things, financial support, and an alternative home to 1,300 refugees. This was achieved through the national mobilisation of the white community, inclusive of state departments, local branches of the International Red Cross, welfare organisations, universities, cultural groups, individuals, expatriate groups, municipalities and churches. On the other hand, black people’s woes were largely ignored; they were excluded from such initiatives. Indeed, the Hungarian resettlement project took place against the background of increased anti-apartheid protest and repression and events such as the treason trial of several political activists and the Alexandra bus boycott. This duality earned the country both criticism and praise.

### Keywords:

Hungary; refugee; South Africa; Apartheid, Red Cross; resistance.

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## Introduction

The current and ongoing refugee crisis following the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine recalled a similar event 66 years ago when the Soviet Union's occupation of Hungary resulted in what Andreas Gémes calls an "exceptional and fascinating moment in migration history" because of the departure of a significant percentage of the national population. (Gémes, 2009, p.1, 3) This crisis also became the first major post-World War II challenge for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, which was established as a temporary agency in 1950 in order to help with the resettlement of the victims of the war in Europe. Officially, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees was supposed to be disbanded after three years in 1953, but it continued to function way beyond this date and, in 2020, celebrated 70 years of operations. (UNHCR, n.d.) With the start of the Hungarian Revolution in October 1956 and the fleeing of a significant number of Hungarians from their homeland, the issue of refugee assistance became an international point of discussion. South Africa, a member of the UN, became an active participant in this process at a time when its relationship with the international body and some of its members were at an all-time low because of its racial policies. Despite its humanitarian dimensions, South Africa's involvement in the Hungarian refugee crisis was a curious affair, considering that the country only had a small Hungarian population of which only a few individuals achieved any prominence, whether fame or notoriety. Within this small circle were individuals such as nineteenth-century businessman, Alois Nellmapius, a close associate of Paul Kruger, the last president of the South African Republic/Transvaal; Count Elemér Janković-Besan de Pribér-Vuchin, noteworthy for his contribution to local equestrian sport; Reverend Kalman Papp, prominent in the Dutch Reformed Church; and Rabbi Dr Andre Ungerer, a member of the Institute of Race Relations, Head of the Jewish Reform Congregation and the South African Union for Progressive Judaism.<sup>2</sup>

This article, using extensive contemporary newspaper archives, investigates the South African involvement with the Hungarian refugee crisis and its political ramifications and intersections against the backdrop of the early struggle against apartheid. The Johannesburg *Rand Daily Mail*, which covered the process extensively and daily, was particularly informative because of its consistent coverage of the unfolding events. It is argued that the South African involvement in the United Nations' Hungarian relief programme, far from being motivated by humanitarian considerations, rather was a cynical attempt of winning favour with the Western powers. Consequently, South Africa's black anti-apartheid groups criticised the inconsistency and contradictory stance with regards to democracy and human rights for some and repression for others. However, their reaction was uneven and varied between outright rejection and cautious criticism.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, DG Van der Byl, 'A short history of Irene', *Pretoriana: Magazine of the Old Pretoria Association*, 42/43, April, August and December 1963, pp. 1–22; 'Famous dancing horses to be sold', *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 June 1982, p. 3; 'Rabbi ordered by Donges to quit S. Africa', *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 December 1956, p. 1; and KD Papp, *Die lewe en werk van ds Kálmán Papp II (geb. 1924), met verwysing na die Hongaarse agtergrond, die Nederlandse periode en die Suid-Afrikaanse periode (Afrikaans)* (PhD, University of Pretoria, 2010).

### **South Africa Before the Hungarian Refugee Crisis**

In a different context, Du Bruyn and Wessels note that 1948–1958 was characterised by a deep-seated sense of fear among white South Africans – mainly the fear of political domination and economic displacement by black people. This resulted not only in the emergence of rightist thought and right-wing leanings in their political orientation but also gave rise to the institutionalisation of a line of fear (“vreeslyn”) in their politics. Thus, when the National Party won power in 1948, the supporters of the new power bloc insisted on the use of legislation to fashion a socio-political system that combined fundamental values and principles with concrete measures to address internally and externally generated fears. (Du Bruyn & Wessels, 2007, pp. 86-88) This took place two years after the adoption of the United Nations Resolution 103(1) of 19 November 1946 that unequivocally committed the organisation to end religious, racial and other forms of discrimination in the interest of all humanity. (United Nations, 1994, p. 9) Similarly, the National Party’s policy intentions and legislative goals contradicted the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights Resolution 217(III) adopted on 10 December 1948.

Having fought the election campaign on a political platform that promised white voters institutionalised segregation, the governing party, despite South Africa’s status as a United Nations member, started to promulgate various pieces of legislation to achieve its objectives. The stipulations of the *Population Registration Act 30 of 1950*, which had, for the purposes of governance, sub-divided the South African population along racial lines, was, according to Breckenridge, “the bureaucratic cornerstone of the apartheid state, the lynch-pin of the Group Areas Act”. (Breckenridge, 2014, p. 225) Collectively, this suite of legislation outlawed interracial marriages and sexual relations, provided for separate residential areas, prohibited the social mixing of races in most areas of life, and removed non-whites from the common voters roll. The apartheid authorities further used the Suppression of Communism Act (Act 44 of 1950) to repress any resistance against their policies.

The introduction of political apartheid resulted in the launch of a civil disobedience campaign in 1952, the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign, by several domestic anti-apartheid groups. Early support for this action came from the New York-based Americans for South African Resistance (AFSAR), who raised funds and acted as an “information vehicle” through a monthly bulletin to popularise the cause of the oppressed. (Houser, 1977) The State repressed this largely non-violent protest, using the full range of its powers to assault, imprison and exile many activists. This prompted prominent and well-respected activists and opinion-formers such as Chief Albert Luthuli (African National Congress), Dr Martin Luther-King (American civil rights activist), Anglican Priest Father Trevor Huddleston and Ahmed Kathrada (South African Indian Congress) to call for South Africa’s political isolation. (Vinson, 2018; American Activist, 1953)

The South African state, in turn, rejected all efforts of the United Nations to assist in resolving the racial problem and refused to cooperate with the United Nations Commission



on the Racial Situation in South Africa. It further ignored General Assembly Resolution 820(IX) of 14 December 1954, which invited the country to participate in a process to ensure a “peaceful settlement of the racial problem”. Subsequently, it also withdrew its delegation from the tenth and eleventh sessions of the General Assembly in 1955 and 1956 as well as from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Overall, it reduced its presence at the United Nations to a “token representation at meetings” (United Nations, 1994, p. 13) and declared through its Minister of External Affairs, Eric Louw, that it would only return once the Hungarian crisis is discussed and additional once the UN stop interfering in its domestic affairs. (Die Burger, 1956b, p. 1) These actions were condemned by the opposition United Party who denounced it as both ill-timed and unwise. (Die Burger, 1956c, p. 3)

Despite ongoing state repression, the black community continued to resist the imposition of an apartheid society. To increase pressure several organisations, including the African National Congress, South African Indian Congress, South African Coloured People’s Congress, and the white Congress of Democrats, convened the “Congress of the People” in June 1955. On this occasion, the Congress Alliance, as the organising group was called, adopted the Freedom Charter, a representative and collective vision for a post-apartheid South Africa which called for the abolition of the colour bar in all areas of life. (FEDSAW, 1953-63) As these matters started to be debated within the United Nations organisation, ACOA, this faithful American ally of the South African anti-apartheid lobby, convened a conference in New York for 22 October 1955 with the theme “The U.S., The U.N. and Africa” at the Willkie Memorial Building. They aimed to promote a better understanding of the “issues involving Africa being debated in the current session of the United Nations Assembly”. (ACOA, n.d.)

### ***Official South African Government Response***

At the start of the Hungarian crisis in October 1956, South Africa’s relationship with the world, as represented by the United Nations, was thus at an all-time low. It also had no diplomatic representative in Budapest (or Hungary in Pretoria), and except for a Honorary-Consul in the period before the Second World War, South Africans knew very little of this country or the few remaining ‘vague and weak links’ of the past. (Die Burger, 1956b) Following the Russian invasion of Hungary and the installation of an alternative or “puppet regime”, the United States, supported by 18 other states, brought a resolution to the United Nations General Assembly condemning the Soviet Union for the brutal suppression of the Hungarian revolution and called for the withdrawal of all Soviet troops. The South African representative formally registered the country’s refusal to recognise the new political regime installed by the USSR armed forces. He further requested a delay in holding free elections until “order was restored, and freedom from foreign intervention” was secured. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956b) These actions, seemingly preceded the official United Nations’ response since the United Nations was still in the process of “considering placing the item ‘The situation in Hungary’ on the present session

of the Assembly". (Rand Daily Mail, 1956g) This suggests that the Hungarian crisis afforded the apartheid government with an opportunity to score political points in an ever-increasing hostile diplomatic world. This, however, prompted some observers such as A.M. Van Schoor, to refrain from excessive optimism and superficial analysis that approached the Hungarian Revolution as the advent of democracy and the death of communism. (Van Schoor, 1956)

Following its stance in the General Assembly, the practical South African response to the unfolding refugee crisis, started to take shape in October and November. The lead department, the Department of External Affairs, following internal and external deliberations, decided to donate £25,000 towards Hungarian relief and immigration. In addition, it also announced the establishment of a public relief fund to bring Hungarian children to the Union. These intentions were strongly supported by the local media such as the Johannesburg newspaper, the *Rand Daily Mail*, who, on 12 November 1956, strongly implored the country to become a "sanctuary in the sun", to be "generous of heart" and to house the homeless. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956d) It further suggested that the Hungarian crisis required all people of goodwill to take a stand against the massacre of a defenceless people. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956a) This call was preceded by one in the Afrikaans daily newspaper, *Die Burger*, that argued that assistance was both morally justified and an expression of gratitude for the Hungarian's unmasking of the true character of Communism. (Die Burger, 1956a) It further also criticised the 13 countries in the United Nations who abstained from voting against the Soviet Union, accusing them of racial biases against Hungary as a 'white country' and that their abstention was indeed an expression of a deep-seated hate for whites. (Die Burger, 1956c) These sentiments stood in stark contrast to the unfolding events within the country where anti-apartheid protests and repression of legitimate demands were at the order of the day.

The establishment of the Hungarian relief fund was formally announced on 16 November 1956 as the "Governor-General's Committee 1956". It was managed by a board composed of the administrators of the four provinces and South-West Africa (now Namibia) under the chairmanship of the Governor-General, Dr Ernest George Jansen. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956g) Administratively, it was placed under the National Treasury. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956k) Following its administrative clearance, the fund administrators appealed to all individual fundraisers to coordinate their efforts and establish a truly national relief fund. The effort, according to the Governor-General, were motivated by the fact that the Hungarians were a "cultural nation with a proud history who remained true to the Christian tradition and who, despite 10 years of Communist repression, continued to be committed to freedom". (Die Burger, 1956h) Among the first to make a financial contribution was the South-West Africa Administration, which donated £5,000 to the relief effort. Over the ensuing period, the South African government made various financial contributions to the international relief effort. By January 1957, its respective financial contributions amounted to £25,000 and an additional \$10,000. This was distributed to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (\$10,000), the Inter-governmental Committee on European Migration (£15,000), and £10,000 for public relief initiatives and asylum for five hundred (500) individuals. (Héderváry, 1957) In the latter



case, it was decided to direct its assistance specifically to artisans and tradesmen and their families.

Concomitantly with the former decision, the Minister of the Interior, Dr Theophilus Ebenhaezer Donges, instructed the country's Head of Immigration missions in The Hague and Cologne to proceed to Austria to recruit skilled workers from among the refugees in cooperation with the Inter-governmental Committee on European Migration. He also appealed to South African businesses and individuals to offer "steady employment" for the selected immigrants. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956l) This prompted some, such as James McColl Wintour chairman of the Commercial Exchange of Southern Africa to warn against the continued denial and repression of Black ambitions and to point out the common features of the local and Hungarian crisis and the likelihood of the same occurring locally and creating a 'second Hungary'. (Die Burger, 1956g) On the home front, the Department of Transport authorised the state carrier, South African Airways, to transport relief provisions cost-free to Hungary. In addition, the wife of the Commandant-General of the Union Defence Force, Mrs Klopper, initiated a fundraising drive directing an appeal to all commanding officers of all the commands and branches of the Union Defence Force to initiate fundraisers for the relief efforts. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956k)

In addition to the national and provincial sphere of government, municipalities in all four provinces articulated their positions almost from the start. Following the establishment of the Governor-General's Relief Fund, the Transvaal Administrator called for a coordinating meeting to secure the cooperation of all stakeholders in the province and make sure that all funds raised would find their way to the Transvaal Governor-General's Relief Fund. This, in turn, was followed by a meeting of all the mayors of Transvaal and the Witwatersrand municipalities in November 1956, on the initiative of the Johannesburg City Council. The motive was to ensure better coordination of municipal fundraising efforts and to consider the establishment of a Mayoral Relief Fund. The meeting resolved to "do everything they can to assist in the raising of funds which will be handed over to the Governor-General's Relief Fund." (Rand Daily Mail, 1956o) After that, fundraising started earnestly with regular newspaper updates of the multiplicity of efforts undertaken. These include street collections, cash donations and public functions. The Municipality of Springs, for example, very innovatively proposed an "adopt-a-Hungarian-family" scheme for groups of ten (10) people in the Springs community to "ensure their social and financial rehabilitation in the town" and to facilitate their inclusion also into housing schemes. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956p)

In Natal, following a community meeting organised by the Municipality of Estcourt in the Midlands and chaired by its mayor, the Hungarian situation was thoroughly discussed. Those in attendance, involving up to three hundred (300) families, resolved to offer accommodation for refugee children. This offer was conveyed to the Office of the Prime Minister, accompanied by the request for "unrestricted immigration facilities for such refugees, for the government to pay their passage to South Africa; and official cooperation with committees formed in the Union to provide homes and clothing for the refugees". (Rand Daily Mail, 1956e) Others, such

as the Cape Town City Council, made financial donations to the Red Cross Hungarian Relief Fund (Cape Region).

### ***South African Civil Society Response***

From the onset, the events in Hungary attracted the interest of ordinary people and groups within the South African society. Among those with an almost automatic interest were welfare groups such as the South African Red Cross Society, the *Suid-Afrikaanse Noodhulp Liga* (South African Emergency Care League), the Save the Children Fund, and expatriate groups such as the Hungarian Settlers Association. The welfare of children acted as a spur for individual and group involvement. There were, however, also other factors that raised the interests of schools, churches, universities, and cultural groups such as the South African PEN Club.

The South African Red Cross Society directed the civil society response to the humanitarian crisis from the beginning. Its counterpart in Hungary was the only recognised relief organisation at the time of the crisis and appealed for assistance to its international network. In mid-November, the local chapter issued an appeal for relief assistance to the South African society. It opened a Hungarian Refugees Clothing Depot in Johannesburg, staffed by thirty (30) women who sorted and packed parcels for overseas dispatch with paper, string and glue donated by local factories. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956q) In addition, local communities across the country, started their own fundraising initiatives, both under and outside of jurisdiction of the Red Cross. (Eikestad Nuus, 1956a) Following the start of the national fundraising initiative, the Red Cross Society decided on a meeting of its main committee to craft a workable coordination strategy. This was particularly needed since everybody started to organise fundraisers such as street collection or solicited financial and other donations from the public. They were supported in their efforts by brethren organisations such as the *Suid-Afrikaanse Noodhulp Liga* and the Save the Children Fund (South Africa). The former, other than the Red Cross whose donations were paid into the account of the international body, deposited their collection into the account of the Governor-General's Relief Fund. (Eikestad Nuus, 1956d)

In addition to fundraising and the collection of emergency provisions for the basic needs of the refugees, all three organisations received a significant number of applications for the adoption of Hungarian orphans. These requests came from all levels of society and across the racial divide from the "dorps, farms and big cities". (Rand Daily Mail, 1956n) On the day of the official aid announcement, the offices received 191 applications from Johannesburg, 110 from Salisbury, and at least a thousand (1000) from the rest of the country. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956g) East London received nine (9) applications for twelve (12) children and gifts of clothing and cash, growing to 205 applications in Johannesburg, fifty (50) in Cape Town, and Salisbury receiving more than two hundred (200) applications by mid-November. This prompted the Red Cross to warn against expectations of adoptions and to caution potential applicants of orphaned children about the likelihood of child theft. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956i) Finally, the government officially announced that no Hungarian orphans were available for South African





adoption by the end of November. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956r) The focus, as a result, then shifted to qualified families and other individuals in search of asylum. Throughout, several Red Cross branches continued to fundraise and make monetary contributions.

Expatriate Hungarians and Austrians, united as the Hungarian Settlers Association, were among the first responders when the call for social relief assistance was issued. Those based in Johannesburg started to fundraise in earnest. Some of the early events were a concert in the Majesty Theatre in Johannesburg organised by Hugo Keleti and a street collections campaign. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956k) In addition, ten (10) expatriate Austrian and Hungarian females collected warm winter clothing for Hungarian refugees, which was carried to its destination free-of-charge by the local airline, Trek Airways.

Beyond the welfare sector, various South African churches similarly reacted to the emerging crisis following a World Council of Churches appeal for collections to aid the relief effort. This call was taken up by the Anti-Communist Action Commission of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa consisting of the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk), the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk) and the Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa (Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika). (Giliomee&Schlemmer, 1983, p. 45) The latter in November 1956, for the first time, formally reflected on the Hungarian situation in its official mouthpiece, *Die Kerkblad*. In its editorial commentary, it pointed out that the Hungarian church belonged to the Calvinist church family and could boast an estimated 3 million members. As such the South African Reformed Church felt a close affinity (“baie na aan ons”) with the Hungarians (‘a mourning mass’) and appealed to its congregants to think about the country and refugees. It further saw the unfolding crisis as an opportunity for the Hungarian Reformed Church, after years of communist repression, to ‘rise with honour from the dust of humiliation and destruction’. (Die Kerkblad, 1956) It further condemned the lack of military intervention of Hungary’s neighbours and described the multitude of public declarations and acts of charity and assistance as little more than a detestable ‘phariseeism’ during the carnage. (Die Kerkblad, 1957) For the South African church, the circumstances surrounding Hungary, displayed an uncannily similarity to the last days of the former Boer republics during the late nineteenth-century.

The Dutch Reformed Church in turn, appealed to all its congregations and members from pulpits and through its newspaper, *Die Kerkbode*, to support the relief fund. (Die Kerkbode, 1956a) It motivated its intervention action in the following manner:

[Large] parts of the population of Hungary were Protestant and represented an important section of the Reformed Churches of Eastern Europe – “Christian charity demands that we should show compassion to them in their hour of need and suffering”. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956p, p. 6)

Furthermore, the Dutch Reformed Church appealed for the proper screening of immigrants for their religious descent. The Synodical Commission of the church in the Cape Province further requested that only those immigrants who profess to the Protestant faith, be



admitted. (Beukes, 1956) To appraise its congregants about the state of affairs in Holland, it also published a report on the activities of a number of church organisations such as the Lutheran World Federation and the Society of Socialist Priests in mitigating the refugee crisis. (Keet, 1957) Like its Afrikaans counterparts, the Bishop of Johannesburg (Anglican Church of the Province of South Africa) appealed to all its members for special collections for Hungarian and Middle Eastern Relief. This call was also taken up by the Methodist Church, which implored its membership to institute special collections. The Cape Jewish Orphanage from their side offered their facility for children of the Jewish faith. This was in line with the editorial remarks in *Die Burger* of 17 November that South African involvement in the relief effort stemmed from the religious inter-twineness ('godsdienstige verbondenheid') of the two countries, and its common Calvinist character. (Die Burger, 1956c)

The National Council of South African Women was equally determined to assist and requested each branch to sponsor at least one female by arranging and providing accommodation and employment "generally supervising their welfare until they are satisfactorily established in South Africa". (Basutoland News, 1957) In addition, they volunteered to assist immigrant learner-miners in Johannesburg's mines and lead a campaign inviting families to extend hospitality to these men.

Universities worldwide were among the first to protest Soviet aggression in Hungary. In addition, they started various fundraising drives for Hungarian relief. Two early initiatives were those of the student body of the University of Glasgow in Scotland, which held a "Flag Day" demonstration to raise funds. This example was followed by Japanese students who initiated similar efforts. On 14 November 1956, students from the University of Pretoria and the Normal College in the city, dressed in "mourning black", led a public march to "protest against the suppression of freedom in Hungary and pledged their support for her people". In addition, flags on nearby buildings were flown at half-mast. Five hundred (500) members of the public joined the demonstration, which was addressed by the rectors of both institutions and Reverend Papp, a Hungarian priest from Krugersdorp, who thanked the students for "their stand in the cause of freedom". (Rand Daily Mail, 1956j) On this occasion on Church Square, the Rector of the University of Pretoria announced the establishment of an aid fund. They also issued a nation-wide appeal for monetary contributions, food, blankets, warm clothing, and underwear, and concomitantly also set up the Hungarian Student's Aid Fund controlled by the Student Representative Council and appealed to other universities and the Prime Minister's Office to play a role in this regard.

The Pretoria example was followed by the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch, and Natal, who also pledged their support through innovative fundraising initiatives. However, students at the University of Stellenbosch attempted to extend their contribution beyond rendering relief services. (Die Burger, 1956k) They wanted to volunteer as soldiers to go and fight the Soviets in Hungary and beyond, demonstrating in protest, committed to fundraising to send volunteers to Austria to join the relief effort. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956c; Eikestad Nuus,



1956c) Their fundraising included door-to-door collections, residence fundraisers, in addition to a movie-house funding appeal and collection. (Eikestad Nuus, 1956e) During their preparations they received assistance and letters of introduction from among others, the Austrian, Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian and French consulates. (Eikestad Nuus, 1956c) Their ambitious fighting plans, however, failed resulting in only seven volunteers departing for Europe to render physical assistance and to move beyond mere lip-service. (Eikestad Nuus, 1956f) The National Union of South African Students, the organised voice of white student bodies across the country, appealed to the five universities to adopt one or more Hungarian refugee students on a scholarship basis. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956o) They also requested the principals of these institutions to become true partners and indicate their intention to ask the government for special permits and all-cost inclusive scholarships. They further linked up with the World University Service and 16 other country chapters for optimal impact. (Héderváry, 1956) North of the border, in Rhodesia, some of the local students joined the British Universities Volunteer Force to physically aid the fighting Hungarians. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956za)

The rest of the education sector was also among the first responders after the relief assistance call. In addition to various reports of individual children donating their pocket money, organisations such as the Germiston Principals and Vice-Principals Association attempted to ensure a coordinated response. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956n) One of their more prominent initiatives was an appeal to schools in their district to participate in a “Mile of Pennies Campaign” to raise funds for the relief effort. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956k) This was supplemented by a boxing tournament which raised a record amount of £830 for the relief fund. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956s) More modest but not less noteworthy were the efforts of some, such as the school children from the Lewisham Primary School in Krugersdorp, who collected £20 in pennies for the refugee fund. (Ibid)

Following a similar approach as the International Red Cross Society, the International PEN Club, following an appeal from its Hungarian branch on Radio Free Europe, also issued a worldwide call to others “for an expression of solidarity with Hungarian writers and intellectuals in their terrible ordeal”. The South African PEN Club cabled the international body immediately after receiving the appeal, firstly transmitting its “full sympathies” with their Hungarian counterparts and, secondly, enquiring about the existence of a “refugee writer’s relief fund” that they could contribute to. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956h)

The call to contribute also touched the hearts of individuals, irrespective of race, across the length and breadth of the country who, on their own initiative, started various relief fundraising drives and collected personal donations from the public. At its most basic level, one individual offered her engagement ring valued at £220 as the “only valuable thing I have to give”. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956f) Another, similarly, offered her bridal-gown for the marriage of two refugees after they arrived in South Africa. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956zf) Further, violinist Ralph Kastner availed his services for a fundraising performance. A few offers of relief, albeit limited in scope, also came from the black community. Members of the Indian community in

the Natal town of Estcourt, for example, formed a fundraising committee to assist the relief effort of its white counterparts. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956k) Further, one Solly Cassim (officially classified Cape Malay) wrote to the *Rand Daily Mail* offering to adopt one or two refugee children “without any ulterior aim or purpose, but with a feeling in our hearts that cannot be described in words”. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956m) Other non-whites expressed their support through donations to their local Red Cross branch. (Die Burger, 1956f)

### ***Refugee Arrival and Resettlement***

Following the decision to focus on recruiting tradesmen and their families rather than orphans, the South African relief effort formally kicked in December 1956. From the get-go, the Union Government set a target of a thousand immigrants – categorised as five hundred (500) tradesmen and five hundred (500) “mainly of aged relatives of the first and others so placed that humane reasons for their admissions outweighs their capacity for employment”. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956v) Leading this process was E. Van Zyl Hofmeyer, Chief of Immigration at the South African embassy in The Hague assisted by other immigration officials in Keulen, Germany. (Die Burger, 1956d) Given the stated numbers and categories of persons to be selected, the South African government intensified its call for public donations. (Rand Daily Mail, 1957b) These efforts were further supported by sympathetic and often heart-rendering articles in popular Afrikaans family magazines such as the *Naweekpos*, *Brandwag* en *Huisgenoot* which inter alia offered what was called ‘a peep behind the Iron Curtain’ and reflections on the ‘hell in Hungary’; a letter from a ‘bloody Hungary’ and ‘people without country and without name’. (A.I.D, 1956; Geldenhuys, 1956; Huisgenoot, 1956; Steytler, 1956) This was further consolidated by heart-rendering first-hand accounts by the victims of the human costs of the Russian invasion. (Gyovarski, 1956) One report from journalist Herman Steytler, based on direct interaction with potential immigrants to South Africa, noted that among the interested were “excellent types”, i.e. “no weaklings, or loafers or worthless or spineless” and that the country was provided with a unique opportunity to recruit a group of “first-class and upstanding future citizens”. (Steytler, 1956)

The first group of immigrants arrived on 17 December – an event preceded by a high level of confidentiality and secrecy on the part of the authorities. The Department of Interior, for instance, kept their time of arrival a secret, with only limited information released to the media. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956y) On their arrival, the group was formally welcomed by four interpreters and the Minister of the Interior, Dr ET Donges, who described the initiative as “bringing you from winter to sunshine is South Africa’s tribute to a great country and a brave people”. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956zb; 1956zc) Also in attendance were around half of the Hungarian expatriates resident in the country and representatives of the SA Hungarian Association. (Die Burger, 1956o; 1956n) After their official welcome, the group of 75, under unofficial group leader and lawyer, Dr Roland Németh – one of only three English-speaking individuals in the group – were assisted by a number of expatriates who resided in



Johannesburg and the group were temporarily housed at a workers hostel in Vanderbijlpark; one family was sponsored by relatives in Maritzburg. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956z) Within the group were eight individuals who were earmarked for training as miners at the Government School of Mines in Johannesburg, while the rest were all fully qualified artisans who could be employed with immediate effect. These men were only part of the final group destined for the mining sector that offered at least a hundred and fifty (150) training positions. Similar offers were received from the railway services and several private entities. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956w)

Newspapers like the *Rand Daily Mail* welcomed the arrival of the first group of immigrants. Generally, they praised the scheme, remarking that South Africa “needs people of talents and skill to help, not merely in the development of South Africa’s untouched resources, but also the maintenance of industry and the upkeep of production at the proper standards of efficiency. It needs manpower to keep the wheels going round”. Further that “these Hungarians have the makings of good settlers and good South Africans. Diversity of people and ideas makes society vigorous, and these newcomers bring human elements that should add something new and enterprising to the mosaic of South African life.” (Rand Daily Mail, 1956zd) Against this background, the British monarch’s Christmas message to the Commonwealth was, “let’s give them a true refuge”. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956ze) To provide further Christmas cheer, members of the South African Hungarian Association organised a proper festival meal, the singing of traditional Hungarian songs after the formal lunch in addition to provide Christmas trees to the transit facility to ensure an appropriate atmosphere. (Die Burger, 1956r) In addition, the Rembrandt Tobacco Corporation donated a gift of £10 to all individual refugees, including children to provide them with their first source of money since fleeing their motherland. (Die Burger, 1956p) Collectively, noted Die Burger, these developments brought South Africans much closer to the events in Hungary and gave it a new immediacy while simultaneously tying the destiny of the two countries together, albeit in a limited fashion. (Die Burger, 1956q)

Following the integration of the first group, Reverend Papp of the Dutch Reformed Church Krugersdorp, a linguist who taught Afrikaans classes to immigrants, was appointed as the official government representative tasked with screening potential immigrants. This followed reports that a former member of the security police was among the refugees and that some refugees were unhappy about several issues such as their workplace placement, the requirement of some employers that immigrant workers subject themselves to aptitude testing, and the desire of placement in their field of training. (Rand Daily Mail, 1957d; 1957e; 1957f) Papp also assisted the new arrivals by teaching classes in English and Afrikaans to improve their language competency and to aid their integration into larger society. (Die Burger, 1956s)

The second group arrived in South Africa on 26 December 1956 from camps in Austria and was similarly housed in the Vanderbijlpark Resettlement camp. The majority were married couples with children, welcomed by the town folk and fellow refugees. It brought the number

of individuals accommodated to 137. At that point, only ten from the previous group were successfully placed in jobs. By January 1957, seven groups of refugees were received in the country. As part of the resettlement programme, the Iron and Steel Corporation of South Africa (Iskor) and one of the employers of the Hungarian refugees offered loans to buy furniture. These offers were reportedly declined by some who wanted their independence and as a matter of pride. (Rand Daily Mail, 1957c) Thanks to a coordinated effort involving the Departments of Labour and Social Welfare, all refugees were successfully placed in employment. In cases where placement was problematic, alternative offers were made while ongoing appeals for employment and clothing for both sexes were continued.

Nine out of ten refugees from the ten groups processed were successfully placed by mid-January. The majority of the first 225 refugees were suitable qualified engineers and, therefore, ready for immediate placement within the local industry. The second largest group consisted of operators, millers, miners and hairdressers, surveyors and architects. (Rand Daily Mail, 1957a) Some of these, such as married couple Oscar and Maria Moha'scy, had guaranteed employment and were even sponsored with essential clothing and shoes. (Kain, 1957) Against this background, the appeal for relief assistance continued and, by this stage, also included further requests for temporary accommodation, clothing, shoes and ongoing financial contributions. By February 1957, a group of 18 new arrivals, placed at the Government Miner's Training School in Randfontein Johannesburg, disappeared after being informed that mining was dangerous and that they were allocated to the uranium mines. (Rand Daily Mail, 1957e) This situation, however, was soon resolved and by the middle of the month the *Huisgenoot* was able to report that "Die Hongare WERK!" with reference to their skill, diligence and the successful conclusion of the immigration scheme. (Van Zyl, 1956) Care was also taken to focus on a range of good news stories associated with the scheme such as the reuniting of family members for the first times since 1947. (Huisgenoot, 1957b) Throughout the Noodhulp Liga and Red Cross continued its involvement and during February 1957 the latter directed an appeal to South Africans to also donate summer clothing for Hungarian refugees en route to Australia, via Cape Town. (Eikestad Nuus, 1957)

### ***Political Intersections***

The refugee scheme intersected with key political events, especially anti-apartheid resistance within South Africa. Black political organisations were extremely critical about the approach and actions of the National Party government in the light of its own domestic record, and especially severe in its criticism was the Non-European Unity Movement. Its stance on the Soviet invasion of Russia – articulated by its leadership through the party mouthpiece, *The Torch* – condemned, firstly, what they referred to as the "reforming regime" of Imre Nagy and gave its unconditional support to the Soviet invasion. Its leader, Isaac Tabata, further described the unfolding events as an imperialist conspiracy against the Warsaw Pact countries and an attempt by the "whole imperialist world – from Washington down to Stellenbosch and



Pretoria universities” at “restoring the old pre-war order of capitalist-fascism and Catholic feudalism”. (The Torch, 1957a) The organisation questioned the Mayor of Cape Town’s extension of greetings and message of sympathy to the Hungarian population, calling it unilateral and minus the backing of the oppressed city population. (The Torch, 1957b) The Non-European Unity Movement also had very little positive to say about the relief effort and denounced the programme and international indignation that followed the Soviet invasion as a “hysterical crusade”. (Hirson, 1991) Those South African universities that were participating in the relief effort but who were quiet about the country’s domestic political situation were labelled as nothing more than “fascist nurseries” and “implacable enemies of democracy and human rights” who should refrain from criticising the anti-apartheid movement as being insensitive to white or European suffering. (The Torch, 1956)

The South African Communist Party, an equally staunch opponent of apartheid and racialism, similarly supported and defended Soviet actions. Some members regarded the Hungarian resistance as counter-revolutionary, a stance resulting in those in disagreement leaving in protest. In comparison, this stance was quite mild compared to that of the Non-European Unity Movement. This was also true of the stance of the African National Congress, who merely declared that:

We believe that every nation is entitled to settle its own affairs, including the people of Hungary. The A.N.C. feels a sense of disappointment and regret at the bloodshed in Hungary and sincerely hopes that peace will be restored without delay in this country. (Benson, 1963, p. 230)

Given the loaded political atmosphere, the organisation decided to “reserved final judgment on the situation in Hungary until the air was cleared of obvious partisan charges and counter-charges”. (Ibid) Its individual leaders, such as Albert Luthuli and Oliver Tambo, further condemned the ruthless intervention of Hungary by the Soviet Union.

As the South African Hungarian Relief Programme started to gain momentum, the apartheid authorities arrested 75 activists of all racial groups on charges of high treason and for “hostility against the State”. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956t) Concomitantly, it expelled Hungarian-born Rabbi Dr André Ungerer, a member of the Institute of Race Relations, Head of the Jewish Reform Congregation and the South African Union for Progressive Judaism, seemingly for his ongoing criticism of the government’s racial policies. (Rand Daily Mail, 1956u) Two days after the first group of immigrants arrived in Johannesburg, the so-called “Treason Trial” involving 151 activists from all over the country started at the Drill Hall in Twist Street. The ensuing protest from supporters of the anti-apartheid movement, were described by the pro-Hungarian refugee programme newspapers such as Die Burger, as a massive display of a contempt of court by a group political ruffians (‘politieke skollie element’). (Die Burger, 1956l) This duality on the part of the apartheid authorities and its media supporters, was further highlighted by their embrace within the ranks of the first refugee arrivals of one Eugene Fodor, a noted anti-communist student and a former political prisoner. He had served a five-year

sentence for high treason against the Hungarian communist state (1949–1954). (Rand Daily Mail, 1956zc)

The New Year started with a bus boycott by the black residents of the dormitory township of Alexandra in Johannesburg following a price increase of one penny (25 cents at the time) on routes around the city and to Pretoria, followed by several sympathy boycotts elsewhere in the country. (Pirie, 1983, p. 68) These boycotts were retaliation by the politically frustrated residents in response to a lack of consultation and input into the decision-making structures of both public and state organisations and institutions. The Alexandra Peoples Transport Committee, including the strongly anti-apartheid African National Congress, led the process, with the African National Congress also providing legal representation for a court challenge against the increase. These events effectively pushed the integration of the Hungarian refugees off the main media pages.

As the boycott started to take effect, the apartheid authorities, despite pleas from white-owned businesses and others, took a hard line and refused to negotiate with what they termed communist agitators. To regain the initiative, it appointed inspectors to prosecute and fine illegal and unlicensed taxi-operators and those that provided a car-pool service to boycotters. In addition, it used the police to intimidate black licensed taxi owners, cyclists, and passengers at random roadblocks and subjected them to body searches and impromptu passbook raids. Under these conditions and with the assistance of the State, the bus company stiffened its resolve and threatened to terminate the bus service. They also retrenched a significant number of their black labour force, (Ibid) effectively turning the boycott into a political protest, a view supported by a range of political activists such as Treason Trialist Ruth First. The latter, a member of the South African Communist Party, was unequivocal that the boycott resulted from “the national policy of segregation, or apartheid, which has led to siting African townships at the outskirts of the cities where land is cheapest and furthest from the white areas”. Further that it was “no protest by Africans hidden among the dusty squares of the segregated locations, but an army of protesters, voting with their feet” whose slogan of “Azikhwelwa” (We shall not ride) was “one of those terse, succinct, ‘magic’ catchwords that epitomises a whole legion of African demands, a concept of struggle, an entire campaign”. (First, 1957)

These events in South Africa – the arrival and integration of the Hungarian refugees and the persecution of black political activists for their opposition to apartheid – attracted significant support from African Americans in the United States. Various organised groups and individuals were indeed critical of the relief effort and contrasted it with the position of black South Africans. Others also found the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and the lack of Western support to the victims as a good example of white international indifference and the persistence of a “colour-line”, which turned the situation in Hungary into a common struggle and one that they could identify with. They consequently criticised their government for their apparent support for relieving white suffering and ignoring black pain. (Wonder, 1997) The





refugees settled into their new life away from the limelight en route to becoming part of what Eli Weinberg in a different context call, “a class of privileged supervisors, whose interest would to some extent coincide with those of the exploiters and who would act as a bulwark between the white masters of the land and the mass of the exploited non-whites”. (Weinberg, 1958, p. 19)

### ***Assessment***

Based on the available evidence, the official South African-Hungarian relief effort by the apartheid government was consistent with its domestic policies of advancing and strengthening the white population and its associated interests. Its efforts, however, were also supported by a diverse group of organisations and individuals from within the white community for whom the humanitarian goal was the main consideration. However, the political undercurrent of race and the advancement of white interests were omnipresent and cast their long shadow over the unfolding relief effort. Despite civil organisation’s best societal efforts to maintain an apolitical stance, the politics behind their efforts were strongly accentuated by their contradictory relationship with the apartheid state and their failure to see the contradiction between their demand for Hungarian freedom and independence and their support for a repressive, anti-democratic and minority regime which denied basic human rights to their fellow citizens. These contradictions effectively blemished and reduced the South African relief effort to little more than a cynical act of convenience and appeasement using anti-communist rhetoric to secure and maintain the goodwill of the Western bloc within the United Nations as a counter to the hostile black opposition that demanded stronger action against the apartheid regime. On the other side of the coin, the need to secure and maintain broad-based international support resulted in an uneven response on the part of the still nascent, domestic anti-apartheid movement. While the Non-European Unity Movement took a hard and uncompromising stance and outrightly rejected the relief effort as an imperialist stunt, the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party were more measured. Their criticism aimed to prevent the perception of being non-caring and even anti-white. Overall, the South Africa-Hungary relief effort was a minor event during a politically volatile period. High profile events and ongoing anti-apartheid campaigns, such as the Alexandra Bus Boycott, soon forced the refugee resettlement programme off the front pages and into oblivion, without making any particular and immediate impact on the liberation struggle.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

## Notes on Contributor

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