Gusztáv Kecskés’s “Refugee Transport and the Cold War: The Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM) and the Hungarian Refugees of 1956” is an attempt to unfold the history of the management of the migration of refugees from Austria and Yugoslavia after the Hungarian refugee crisis in 1956. The main argument is that the involvement and effective operation of the ICEM in the Hungarian refugee crisis assisted in the institutional development of the ICEM; it consolidated its relationship with the press and other international actors, and assisted in the globalization of the ICEM’s standing and its prestige as an international organization that joined in the operations of refugee migration.

The article is based on published and unpublished primary and archival sources from the archive of the International Organization for Migration (IOM/ICEM) and other international organizations (mainly the United Nations) and state archives (France, United Kingdom, United States of America), and these sources balance well with the secondary literature. The combination of international and state archives works in favor of the article’s argument. By using the IOM archives, the author reveals the ICEM’s policy and strategy, while the state archival records and the archives of other organizations compliment the author’s examination and facilitate his effort to overcome the restrictive policy enforced by the IOM regarding access to research the Organization’s archives. In this regard, the article uncovers aspects of the Hungarian refugee crisis which have not been discussed in the respective historiography produced thus far. Furthermore, the available information in the archival sources is also indicative of the interest in the Hungarian refugee crisis of various states and organizations of the period.

After an introduction to the historiography of the Hungarian revolution, the author divides the analysis in the article into three sections. The first part analyses the process for the establishment of the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM), its mandate, administration, and operations. It concludes with the main priorities faced by ICEM on the eve of the 1956 Hungarian refugee crisis. The analysis follows in the second part with an introduction of the events that took place after the demonstration of the university students on 23 October 1956 in Hungary, which was followed by the armed
interventions of the Soviet army on 31 October and 4 November and the political change in Hungary. These developments resulted in about 200,000 persons fleeing from Hungary to Austria and to Yugoslavia. The author offers useful statistics on the relocation of refugees to other European and overseas countries, as well as the total cost involved, which is estimated around US$100 million (8).

The main and last part of the article consists of an assessment of the contribution of ICEM to the Hungarian refugee crisis. Kecskés discusses the migration infrastructure and mechanisms built by the ICEM in the support of its mission in Austria, including the pathway towards the attraction of funding by ICEM member-states for such a cause. The article also includes the mobilization of the organization’s officials and staff from emigration countries in Europe, the recruitment of new staff, and the setting up and closing down of field offices and of reception centers based on the operational needs per time. The article culminates with a detailing of the number of refugees transported per operational stage, and the process of data collection in order to be matched with the selection criteria, if any, of the overseas immigration countries. The analysis continues with the phases of the ICEM’s involvement mainly in Austria since 1956, and secondarily since 1957 in Yugoslavia, which has been marked by the ICEM’s calls to its member-states for funding, the relative financial and operational difficulties encountered, and the resettlement pace from both countries.

The ICEM’s involvement in the Hungarian refugee crisis was a formative incident, as it occurred in a period when the organization faced financial difficulties and seemed to have met its foundational goal, namely the international management of what was referred to as the “surplus population” from some parts of Europe. The Hungarian refugee crisis proved that the ICEM was a justifiable international organization given its effective and timely organization of the operation. Therefore, the article’s contribution lies in the examination of this incident and the transformation of the organization from a temporary to a permanent agency.

Amidst the Cold War, the ICEM also assisted in the rendering of symbolic dimensions in favor of the West, as the refugees were fleeing the Communist regime for the Western nations. Kecskés correctly attributes the success of the resettlement of the Hungarian refugees under ICEM to the Cold War rivalry (8–9). Nevertheless, the “air bridge” of Hungarian refugees did not carry “the largest number of refugees in history” (16). If we consider later ICEM refugee transfers, especially from the so-called “Indochina” region from which about 1.5 million people were air-transferred by the organization from the 1970s to 1996, it is not possible to compare the “air bridge” of Hungarian refugees, which relocated 144,182 persons from Austria between 1957 and 1959 (14). The Hungarian crisis did, however, mark the largest number of refugees transported by air until 1958. In that year Jules Witcover published his article, “The Role of the

Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration in the Resettlement of Hungarian Refugees, 1956–57,” which the author cites (n.110, 16).

What is interesting in this article is the process of the establishment of the migration infrastructure of the ICEM as a response to the needs of the handling of the Hungarian refugee crisis and the mobilization of human and capital resources, as explained above. In addition, the article also contributes to our knowledge regarding the approach of the ICEM with the international press which, thanks to the 1956 Hungarian refugee crisis, reached a new level. The author outlines ICEM’s strategy for the development of its Public Information Offices. It called for the hiring, recalling, and borrowing of information officers even from other international and European organizations, and was conducted in order to support the ICEM’s needs. The ICEM administration understood that since the ICEM was in a critical stage of its own existence, its involvement in the Hungarian refugee crisis could offer a safety-net for the continuation of its work and the organization’s perpetuation. The result was the ICEM’s stronger engagement with the press and the production of its own publications. This refugee crisis offered a much-needed international public role to the ICEM: it proved the organization’s effectiveness, which was translated in the stabilization of its existence, the adhering of new member-states, and the increase of its operations and budget.

ICEM’s work in Austria, a member-state of the Organization and the country which received the majority of the Hungarian refugees, is very well analyzed here. However, an additional dimension and interesting part of the Hungarian refugee crisis lies in the work of the ICEM in Yugoslavia. A dimension which is not highlighted enough is that Yugoslavia, as a socialist country, was not a member-state of ICEM, while in addition, the population to be supported in their migration from Yugoslavian territory were from Hungary, which was also not a member-state country of the organization. This incident constituted a precedent for the ICEM’s involvement and intervention in refugee crises in Asian and African countries, especially during the 1960s and the 1970s. However, Kecskés mentions, the ICEM’s operation in Yugoslavia was proposed to the government by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) envoy in Yugoslavia. It would be interesting to further analyze the reasons for the ICEM’s involvement in this country. As in the case of Austria, the author analyses the ICEM’s needs and funding in order to respond to the transport of Hungarian refugees from Yugoslavia, as well as the statistical outcome of ICEM’s operation in the country.

While the article is entitled “Refugee Transport and the Cold War...”, the transport companies are missing from the analysis, as are the arrangements and negotiation between ICEM and the member-states for means of transport. Kecskés provides some information regarding the transport means used (4–5, 16, 19), but these references remain on a superficial level regarding transport or maritime or aviation history. Therefore, despite the title, the article does not refer to transportation matters, but rather to the international management of refugee migration of Hungarians from Austria and Yugoslavia. A title such as

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“Refugee Migration and the Cold War” would have been more representative of the article’s subject. Regarding transport matters, some clarifications are needed. When referring to the International Refugee Organization (IRO) vessels and their transfer to the Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe (PICMME)/ICEM, it is necessary to use quotation marks around “inherit” (4), simply because ICEM did not own a fleet of passenger vessels, but ICEM chartered them for a series of voyages. In fact, the establishment of PICMME/ICEM made the retention of these vessels for migration/refugee needs possible, otherwise they would have to be returned to their pre-World War II use.

The UNHCR was established in December 1950, and not 1951, as stated in the article (6). In addition, cooperation between the ICEM (PICMME at that point) and the UNHCR was agreed to in February 1952 and formalized in April 1952 after the exchange of a series of letters between the two organizations (6). The inaccurate date appears in Jérôme Élie’s 2012 article, “Interactions et filiations entre organisations internationales autour de la question des réfugiés (1946–1956),” which is cited by Kecskés (n. 33, 6).

Finally, the article broadens our understanding on the importance of the Hungarian refugee crisis in 1956 for the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration and the organization’s development in the years that followed. The article is distinguished by the information it provides regarding the migration infrastructure and mechanism built by the ICEM in Austria and Yugoslavia, the organization’s headquarters in the handling of the refugee migration, as well as for its cooperation with other organizations and states operating in this refugee crisis. The author concludes that the ICEM’s contribution in the 1956 Hungarian refugee crisis lies in its documentation and transportation of the refugees (19). Even if

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5 The establishing name of ICEM was named Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe (PICMME) and lasted until October 1952, when it changed to Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM). In 1980 the name of the Organisation changed again to Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM).


7 International Organization for Migration (Geneva), folder Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, Arrangements made for liaison between ICEM and other International Governmental Organizations, P. Jacobsen, Acting Director, PICMME to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Geneva, 27.02.1952; International Organization for Migration (Geneva), folder Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, Arrangements made for liaison between ICEM and other International Governmental Organizations, Made James M. Reader, Deputy High Commissioner to P. Jacobsen, Acting Director, Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe, Geneva, 26.03.1952; International Organization for Migration (Geneva), folder Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, Arrangements made for liaison between ICEM and other International Governmental Organizations, “Note: Liaison between the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Migration Committee,” 18.04.1952.

the transportation mechanism implemented by ICEM is not adequately analyzed, Kecskés’s conclusion on the documentation processes is confirmed through the statistical data provided.

The article can serve as a reference work for the relationship between the ICEM and the UNHCR, which adds to previously published works that are cited by the author. It is also interesting that it addresses the refugee work of the ICEM, which comprises only a small part of the limited historiography on the work of the organization. The article can also act as a call for new works regarding the refugee-related operations of the ICEM, such as the operations of the ICEM-UNHCR office in Hong Kong or Uganda in the 1970s and, more prominently, in the 1970s in the ‘Indochina’ region, when the ICEM assisted in the resettlement of about 280,000 Indochinese between 1975 and 1979. Moreover, until 1996, over 1.5 million Indochinese were resettled in about 70 countries with the support of the ICEM/ICM.

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8 Specifically, the South-East Asian counties, including Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia.