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The Impact of Johnson–Reed in Hungary

Changing Trajectories and Perceptions

Balázs Venkovits

Abstract: This paper serves as an introduction to the thematic cluster "The Impact of Johnson–Reed in Hungary: Changing Trajectories and Perceptions" that includes four papers discussing various aspects of US-Hungarian relations from the mid-1920s to the 1970s. Three papers (written by Tibor Glant, Zoltán Peterecz, and Máté Gergely Balogh) were originally presented at the 2024 conference organized by the University of Debrecen and AHEA on the global impact of US restrictions introduced in the 1920s and are accompanied by a fourth article (by Soma Rédey) offering a fascinating example of post-quota Hungarian immigration. The selected articles introduce not only changes in migration patterns per se but also in mutual perceptions, individual careers, the daily work of American officers in Hungary, and the Hungarian-American community at large due to new regulations related to immigration.

Keywords: *Johnson–Reed Act, quotas, immigration restriction, Hungarian immigration, US-Hungarian relations, Mária Telkes, László Pásztor, J. F. Montgomery*

Biography: Balázs Venkovits is associate professor of American Studies and director of the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Debrecen. He earned his Ph.D. in 2014 and completed his habilitation in 2021. Among others, he is the recipient of the Hungarian OTKA (2022-26) and Jedlik (2013-14) grants, a JFK Research Fellowship (2013) and a Fulbright (2010-2011). His academic interests include travel writing studies, migration studies, and Hungarian immigration to North America, with a special focus on Canada and the 1920s. He has presented and published papers internationally in Hungary, Finland, the US, Canada, Mexico, Poland, the UK, and France. *venkovits.balazs@arts.unideb.hu*

In 1907, the peak year of Hungarian immigration to the United States before the Great War, close to 200,000 immigrants arrived in the country from Hungary in a single year, contributing to the largest wave of migration up to that point with more than one million people going from Hungary to the USA in hopes of a better future.[1] After 1924 and the introduction of the Johnson–Reed Act, the number of Hungarians who were allowed to immigrate into the

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United States in a year was limited to 473 only. In combination with earlier restrictions, this resulted in a huge drop, and between 1920 and 1928 only 32,272 Hungarians arrived altogether (Puskás, *From Hungary* ,164–169; but on this period, see also Puskás, *Ties;* Tezla). Looking at these numbers, it is not difficult to acknowledge that such a drastic change represented the end of mass immigration into the country; not only for Hungarians but also for others in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe (as well as for Asian immigrants). It is also easy, however, to reinforce the cliché that "every ending is a new beginning": the quotas in the United States resulted in the complete transformation of the Hungarian migration trajectory (with new destinations emerging), they contributed to the emergence of transnational networks and various ventures associated with migration, as well as to the growth in unauthorized migration with inter-American repercussions, etc. In the period following the First World War, this coincided with the establishment of US-Hungarian bilateral relations, the transformation of diplomatic contacts, the devastating social and economic impact of the Treaty of Trianon, all of which influenced the mutual perceptions and representations of the two countries.

This thematic cluster examines exactly these issues focusing on the impact of the 1924 quota act on Hungary and Hungarians. It does so from a variety of perspectives and exploring a broad chronological range from the mid-1920s to the 1970s. The idea for such a block of papers emerged from the conference organized at the University of Debrecen in partnership with the American Hungarian Educators Association on August 22–23, 2024. The organizers' intention was to bring together scholars from all over the world to critically reflect on the perceptions and impact of the US Immigration Act of 1924 and other restrictive measures of the time on global migration trajectories and policy. The interdisciplinary conference included presentations on the multifaceted dimensions of migration. Participants joined the conference either in person or online from 10 different countries besides Hungary and the United States, including Belgium, Canada, Czechia, Cuba, Poland, San Marino, Slovakia, and Slovenia, representing history, literary and cultural studies, migration studies, political science, and linguistics.[2] Plenary speakers included Ashley Johnson Bavery (Eastern Michigan University, USA), Anna A. Mazurkiewicz (University of Gdansk, Poland), and Mónika Szente-Varga (Ludovika University of Public Service, Hungary).

This thematic cluster of *Hungarian Cultural Studies* features three papers that were presented at this conference and which relate to the Hungarian aspects of the quota act; these are complemented with a fourth article closely related to the topic at hand and offering fascinating insights into post-quota Hungarian immigration. Before providing more details about these papers, however, it is crucial to understand what the quota act really was and what it meant for Hungary in the 1920s.

Johnson–Reed: Intentions, Implementation, Impact

Immigration has been an integral part of American history and identity contributing to the diversity of the country and the perceptions of the United States as the "nation of immigrants." The US has welcomed people from different parts of the world in numerous waves, and these immigrants contributed to the growth of the country while hoping to achieve their own American

[2] For the full program, see: https://konferencia.unideb.hu/en/conference-program-johnson-reed-100-years-later

dreams. The first major wave started after the War of 1812 and lasted until the Civil War (often referred to as "Old Immigration"), during which close to six million immigrants arrived. Even this number was surpassed by the wave of "New Immigrants" arriving after the 1870s (and before the First World War), this time bringing approximately twenty-six million newcomers to the nation (for an overview of these waves see, for example, Daniels and Powell). This, however, was not a smooth process of acceptance but was often accompanied by anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia, and nativism, more and more often culminating in demands for regulation and restrictions. At first, these demands targeted specific types of individuals or various ethnic, religious or racial groups (like the Irish in the 1850s or the Chinese from the 1870s), the 1920s brought about a much broader anti-immigrant movement, this time targeted particularly against people from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe.[3]

The trend that prompted the strengthening of anti-immigrant voices in the United States was a shift in the home countries of newly arriving immigrants (primarily Eastern and Southern Europe) as opposed to the old immigrants (mostly coming from Northern and Western Europe). This was coupled with fears regarding the potential of these immigrants (for example from Hungary) and the possible threat some thought they represented for Anglo-Saxon/American culture and its homogeneity; many also raised questions related to their willingness to assimilate or even their mental capacities (Jaret; Ludmerer). The idea that the number of these new immigrants should be restricted appeared already at the end of the 19th century, as exemplified by the establishment of the Immigration Restriction League in 1894, but the literacy test demanded for immigrants was introduced only in 1917. By this time, however, more and more people asked for even stricter regulation, a change that was coupled with US entry into the First World War.

The first law that numerically capped the number of immigrants was passed in 1921 and established an "emergency" quota that (instead of being temporary as originally intended) was to be further lowered in the upcoming years both because of the applied percentage and the base year selected for the calculations. The Immigration Act of 1924 set the overall annual limit at 160,000 (later 150,000) and specified the quota for various countries at 2% of the US population born in that country according to the 1890 census; this provided the number of people who could enter the US legally every year. This way the quota of New Immigrants was reduced even more: the 1921 law set the Hungarian quota at 5,747 but, after 1924, only 473 Hungarians could enter the country as quota immigrants annually.[4] The Act is usually referred to by the name of Representative Albert Johnson and Senator David A. Reed. Even though the Hungarian quota was increased in 1929 due to new calculations (to 869), the act brought about the end of free immigration to the United States. It affected especially the regions of Eastern and Southern Europe while it also excluded immigration from Asia (on the latter see Ngai, "Nationalism" and "The Strange Career"). The quota did not apply to countries in the Western Hemisphere, but it also came with stricter border control and deportation rules (Johnson Bavery).

[3] For an overview of the historical, ideological, and legislative forces that contributed to the dramatic shift toward immigration restriction at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States, see Szabó; on changes in migration policies, see Venkovits, "Magyar kivándorlás."

[4] For a more detailed overview (in Hungarian) of the background and impact of the quotas on Hungary see Venkovits, "Leeresztett sorompó".

The drastic cut and strict regulations had an immediate impact on Hungarians who wanted to leave their native land in search of better opportunities in a country devastated by the Great War and its aftermath. The quotas filled up immediately, leaving little chance for people who wanted to immigrate to the United States legally. This resulted in various changes. On the one hand, as the push factors did not disappear (to say the least in post-war Hungary), people began to look for alternative destinations. Western Europe (for example, France, Germany or Belgium), Latin America (especially Argentina or Brazil), Canada and Australia were perceived as possible new destinations, and indeed a growing number of people tried their luck in these countries (for more information see Nóvé; Dreisziger; Frank; Torbágyi, Szente-Varga). This restructuring of the migration pathways took place partly because people thought they would settle down elsewhere after the United States closed its gates, but also because many people looked for a springboard to the "land of opportunities" from other countries, especially those nearby the United States. They could serve as "temporary" stays before moving on to the United States after a few years (in line with the stipulations of the Johnson–Reed Act) or as a means to make it to the United States illegally (see Venkovits, "From Non-Preferred" on Canada, Torbágyi and Szente-Varga on Mexico). It is clear from the above that the quotas and their strict enforcement created an entirely new situation. However, the new law did not stop the United States from being perceived as an attractive immigrant destination from Hungary. The quotas were in effect until 1965, and during this period, Hungarians did arrive (although in much smaller number) as quota and non-quota immigrants, legally and illegally, and also as members of special groups allowed into the country above the quota (most importantly after 1956). In the United States, the restriction could mean a blow to the Hungarian-American communities. However, the new restrictions also built new diasporas with their own organizations across the Americas, many of which, celebrate their one-hundredth anniversaries these years.

The four papers in this thematic cluster examine this post-Johnson–Reed period and the impact of the quotas on Hungary, introducing not only changes in migration patterns per se but also in mutual perceptions, individual careers, the daily work of American officers in Hungary, and the Hungarian-American community. The immigration acts, of course, did not appear in a vacuum: the quotas were the result of the culmination of numerous factors in the 1920s, a period that was truly hectic on both sides of the Atlantic. As Tibor Glant shows in his paper, besides the changes in immigration regulation, there were a lot of other shifts taking place in politics and diplomacy as US-Hungarian relations entered a new, formal, bilateral stage after the First World War. These shifts included the two countries signing a separate peace treaty in 1921 (the same year as the emergency quotas were announced) and a treaty of friendship, trade, and consular rights in 1925 (after the even stricter quotas were introduced). Migration and (positive) perceptions of the United States in Hungary had been clearly linked earlier, and this did not necessarily change, while it was augmented by the image of the United States as a potential prime mover, an *arbiter mundi*. The role of the United States in bringing about treaty revision was also linked to the Hungarian-American communities, even though after 1924 far fewer Hungarians could legally immigrate to the country. As Glant argues in his paper relying on the analysis of three books (works by Lola Réz Kosáryné, Andor Kun, and Gedeon Mészöly), these issues found their way into juvenile literature as well, in a way maintaining or even boosting the idealized prewar image of the US as a "promised land." Travel writing (besides various manifestations of American popular culture) continued to play a central role in shaping perceptions of the United States in an era dominated by the 1924 Johnson–Reed Act.

Although there is no question that the quotas introduced in 1924 meant the end of mass immigration from Hungary, Hungarians—among them some truly exceptional figures—continued to arrive into the country in different ways (for example, as a first step as temporary visitors). Soma Rédey provides a perfect example for this from the year immediately following the introduction of the quotas. One of the best-known group of Hungarian immigrants arriving in the United States in the interwar period were well-known scientists like Ede Teller, János Neumann or Leo Szilárd, among others. As Rédey reminds us, however, an outstanding female scientist, Mária Telkes, had arrived in the United States much earlier, as a pioneer of this group. Based on extensive archival research, we get insights not only into the life, studies, and achievements of the Sun Queen, as Telkes was often referred to, but also into the challenges she had to face as a female scholar (of Jewish origin). The author provides a detailed overview of Telkes's early years in the United States and her work at MIT and elsewhere, her role in the fascinating Dover House project, and her scientific output resulting in the registration of twenty-six patents in the U.S. and another seventeen in other countries related to the utilization of solar power.

The third paper studies the impact of the Johnson–Reed Act not on Hungarian immigration in general but on the changing work of American consulates, embassies in Europe, and in Hungary especially. These institutions and their staff had to deal with the administrative burden deriving from the new law, as those wishing to get a visa as quota immigrants had to complete their complex application process in the home country. The administrative changes also coincided with a growing demand by the Jewish population in Hungary to leave the country. Zoltán Peterecz investigates how the American ministers in Hungary (and in particular J. F. Montgomery who served in this position for the longest time) reacted to and dealt with the new measures in the interwar period. The article showcases that the quotas contributed to a growing administrative burden, especially by the 1930s. Due to the fact that, from the latter half of the decade, the number of Hungarian Jewish people who wanted to immigrate to the United States grew, the American minister in Budapest faced novel challenges and increasing frustration. The article offers a unique case study into how the Johnson–Reed Act of 1924 had (unintended) repercussions in consular posts abroad and how it affected Jewish immigration and refugees in the 1930s.

As noted earlier, the changes in the 1920s could be detrimental to the Hungarian communities in the United States without a continued influx of new immigrants who maintained the institutions and organizations of the earlier wave. The years dominated by the quota were, however, not without exceptions in terms of the arrival of larger and significant groups. Numerically, the most significant event shaping the Hungarian-American communities was the arrival of the approximately 38,000 people admitted into the United States after the 1956 Revolution was crushed by the Soviet forces and close to 200,000 people left Hungary. Máté Gergely Balogh in his article introduces one of these "fifty-sixers," László Pásztor, based on archival research at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, the Hoover Institution Library and Archives, and on interviews he conducted. The paper examines the Nixon campaign of 1972 and the way the Republican Party wished to make itself more attractive for "white ethnic" voters—many of whom belonged to ethnic groups that originated in Southern and East Central Europe. Immigrants from these countries were the major source of influx to the U.S. before the implementation of the quota system in 1924, or they arrived in special groups like the Hungarian "fifty-sixers." The purpose of Balogh's study is to present the outreach of the Republican Party to the East-Central European ethnics during Richard Nixon's1972 presidential

campaign. Special attention is devoted to the role of the Hungarian-American émigré politician László Pásztor (the director of the Heritage Groups [Nationalities] Division of the Republican National Congress) in organizing the ethnics despite the fact that, as the author argues, Pásztor was not seen as the ideal ethnic as he was critical of *détente* and was actively promoting ethnic interests.

With the fourth paper the cluster already reaches beyond the era when the quotas introduced by Johnson–Reed Act were in effect, but all articles stand as witness to the profound impact of the immigration quotas on Hungary and US-Hungarian relations. Anti-immigrant sentiments, calls for regulations, restrictions, stricter border controls, deportations (or, for that matter, illegal immigration) are issues that are as current today as they have ever been. One can, however, go back in history and learn from the experience of the past—we hope that the papers included in this cluster serve exactly such a purpose. At the same time, although it was passed one hundred years ago, the Johnson–Reed Act still poses a lot of scholarly questions for us, and the changes emerging in its wake still need to be studied today. It is the task of researchers to explore and at the same time also preserve the heritage of Hungarian migration from the past one hundred years both in and outside the United States.

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