

Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration

IN recent years, the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration has played an important role in assisting migratory movements from Europe to overseas countries. It has also been active in facilitating the resettlement of European refugees and the work which it performed during the Hungarian exodus has been particularly impressive. This article may help its readers to understand better what ICEM stands for.

Historical Background

In the years immediately following the Second World War, the Western countries were much concerned about economic and political dangers arising in Europe from surplus population and the influx of refugees. The population problems of countries of relatively high birth rate, such as Italy, Greece and The Netherlands, had been made acute by the effects of war and by the fact that overseas migration had ceased during the war years. Political changes had reduced the ability of some countries to absorb their growing population and increased the problem by causing groups of the nationals of these countries, established elsewhere, to return home. The loss of Indonesia weakened the power of The Netherlands to absorb its increasing labour force and added to its population some 300,000 returned Dutch citizens. Italy lost the colonial outlets for its population as well as part of its European territory and received over 400,000 refugees from these former possessions. In Greece, the disasters of the war were followed by civil war which rendered nearly 700,000 persons homeless and, in addition, some 50,000 refugees entered the country from the communist states to the north.

The war created similar problems in countries in which population had hitherto been relatively stable. Western Germany received some 10 million refugees, chiefly of German ethnic origin, and Austria had to bear a similar influx, but on a much smaller scale.

International effort concentrated on one segment of this problem—those persons defined as refugees according to United Nations criteria. The International Refugee Organization assisted, in some form or other, more than 1,600,000 such refugees and succeeded in resettling more than 1,000,000 of them, but its operations were due to come to an end on completion of its programme for 1951.

In December 1951, on the initiative of the United States and Belgium, a conference of interested governments took place in Brussels to consider whether some way could not be found of continuing to use the operational machinery of IRO to deal with the serious problems of refugees and surplus population after that organization's mandate came to an end. At this conference the organization now known as the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM) was established. Although the conference was largely preoccupied with European problems and recognized the necessity of "an increase in European emigration to countries overseas", it considered at