

When the war was over: European refugees after 1945



Briefing Paper 3. Who Assisted the Displaced Persons?

In 1944, as the impending possibility of German collapse became realised, there was rapid realisation that military intervention would be required to control the liberation of the DPs. Military leaders raised concerns that 'uncontrolled self-repatriation' would not only block Allied routes of advance but as potential carriers of typhus DPs could spread disease across Europe. In May 1944, a Displaced Persons Branch of military government was established to control DP movement.

In November 1944, arrangements were made with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) for teams to be brought in to work with the military for the care of DPs. The establishment of Displaced Persons as, at first, a military problem and the use of existing military barracks for their control (many of which had been former work and concentration camps), helped to shape the post-war refugee administration. After 1945, use of refugee camps became accepted practice.

UNRRA's mission was to provide short-term aid to help Europe get back on its feet after the Second World War and to prepare for the repatriation of Displaced Persons who came under Allied control. UNRRA did not question the military assumption that all DPs would want to go home. At its peak UNRRA employed 27,800 people, but by the time the relief teams arrived in the field many DPs had already returned home.

Compared to UNRRA's slow entrance into the field, relief workers from various British voluntary societies had been working with the Allied armies for the care of Displaced Persons throughout the war; 1,500 voluntary relief workers were in the British zone of Germany by July 1945. Voluntary societies included the British Red Cross, Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad, Scouts and Guides International Service, Catholic Committee for Relief Abroad, Salvation Army, Save the Children Fund, Quaker Friends Relief Service and Friends Ambulance Unit and many more.

During the 1940s ideas of how best to assist those displaced in Europe were subject to great debate. These relief workers provided material as well as social and spiritual relief to Displaced Persons throughout Europe. Many relief workers in Germany questioned the use of DP camps, believing that the segregation of nationalities both from each other and from the German population, would lead to the forging of 'competitive nationalism' both in and between the camps. There was also a fear that life in the camps would breed idleness and dependence, the so-called 'DP mentality'. Many relief teams focused on engaging with the

displaced through the formation of DP committees, social activities and work schemes, believing that dependence could only be remedied through increased provisions for independence. Although there were calls for a less rigorous system, with fewer camps, relief workers generally recognised the terrible housing conditions at the end of the war. In the British zone of Germany, for example, only two-thirds of all former dwellings were still habitable.

One of the organisations operating in Germany was the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), who considered themselves 'part of a ministry of reconstruction and reconciliation' believing that 'the bitterness of racial and group hatreds, and the break-down of human faith, are as destructive as the acute shortage of food, clothing and shelter'. The Quaker administration believed that relief workers had a duty to commit to emotional engagement with the displaced; they perceived the emotional restraint of other organisations as a detrimental consequence of professionalism. FRS workers focused on the empowerment of those needing relief, and perceived their role as a duty rather than a profession. Those who worked on behalf of the Religious Society of Friends accepted that, aside from a small sum of pocket money, their positions would be unwaged.

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