When the war was over:
European refugees after 1945

Briefing Paper 1. Who Were the Displaced Persons?

We see a lot about refugees in today's mass media. At the end of the Second World War much of the news was filled with the problem of 'Displaced Persons', or simply 'DPs'. Across Germany and central Europe, the defeat of the Nazi regime left stranded more than six million of its former forced labourers. They were of various nationalities, including Ukrainians, Poles, French, Italians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Belarusians, Russians, and Yugoslavs. Before the war, many had been farmers or industrial workers, along with some professional people. All of them had been abruptly removed from their families and places of work and deported, the majority to Germany and some to German-occupied territories, to carry out industrial or agricultural work for the Nazis. What was to become of them: should they be helped to go home? If they did not wish to go home, should they continue to live alongside Germans, who had often treated them abysmally during the war, or be allowed to settle in a third country?

The situation was complicated by the presence of large numbers of other people who had been 'uprooted', such as concentration camp survivors, refugees and evacuees, and prisoners-of-war. Many Jewish survivors of the Holocaust hoped to go to Palestine. Some evacuees (as in Britain) could be traumatised by their experiences, or alternatively excited by the adventure. Many German POWs held in the Soviet Union were not returned to their families until ten years after the war.

In 1945, with the liberation of Europe, DPs became the responsibility of the victorious Allies. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) employed some 4,000 officials in specially created relief teams that looked after DPs in assembly centres, where arrangements could be made for their repatriation. UNRRA advised DPs that it was in their interests to return to homes where they would 'find familiar patterns and a way of life more in keeping with their national culture than if they were to seek resettlement in strange lands'. They were expected to contribute to the economic reconstruction of their homeland.

UNRRA was not the only agency responsible for assisting DPs. Around 125 voluntary organisations worked alongside UNRRA in the field, including the YMCA/YWCA and the Red Cross, as well as volunteers working for religious denominations, Catholic, Jewish and Protestant.

Between March and September 1945 around 10 million refugees and DPs were repatriated. But at least 1.5 million Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians and others resisted repatriation to countries that now fell within the Soviet sphere of

influence. Some of them feared retribution for having connived at or supported German occupation during the war.

UNRRA's enthusiasm for repatriation contributed to a breakdown in trust between the relief agency and the DPs, as can be seen in the bitter remarks made by one Polish DP who asked: 'Is there really much difference between 'now' and 'before'? I was a number. I am a number. I was called 'Polish dog', now I am called 'wretched Pole'.

Negative attitudes towards DPs surfaced particularly when plans were made to resettle them. One US Congressman described them as 'bums, criminals, black marketeers, subversives, revolutionaries and crackpots of all colours and hues'. Fears were expressed that Nazi war criminals had disguised themselves as DPs in order to evade justice.

Not all DPs were repatriated or resettled. Those who were accused of various petty crimes and misdemeanours or who were turned down on grounds of physical or mental disability continued to be held in camps or lived an uncertain existence as 'free-livers' in Germany and Austria (around one-fifth of remaining DPs fell into that category.) Those whose were left behind became known as the 'hard core'.

Eventually the West German government decided to create a category of 'homeless foreigners' – this gave the DPs some basic rights, but at the same time it allowed Germany to deny any responsibility for having forced them to leave their homes during the war, and it also helped forestall any demands they might make for compensation.

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http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/postwar-refugees/index.aspx

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