When the war was over:
European refugees after 1945

Briefing Paper 2. Life in a Displaced Persons Camp

In autumn 1944, as the impending possibility of German collapse became a reality, the Allied military forces recognised that military intervention would be required not only to assist but to control the liberation of Displaced Persons. Military leaders worried that 'uncontrolled self-repatriation' would not only block Allied routes of advance into Germany but that DPs as potential carriers of typhus could spread the disease across Europe on their return home. The Allied forces established 'assembly centres' and divided DPs into national groups to ensure that only one common language was required in the delivery of orders and to organise DPs for rapid repatriation at the end of the war. By September 1945, around 10 million European refugees and DPs had been repatriated, however 1.5 million Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians and others resisted repatriation. Due to restrictions on emigration opportunities, especially for elderly or sick DPs, some individuals would remain in camps in Germany for a further 15 years. Following the end of the war, care for the Displaced Persons was transferred to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and to voluntary organisations such as the British Red Cross, Catholic Relief Services, the Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad and Quaker Friends Relief Service.

The camps in which the DPs lived varied from collections of wooden huts in which those who had worked on the farms or on the railways had lived, to formidable factory buildings. Some DPs also lived privately in houses and hotels in the nearby towns, although they were often moved into larger camps as the Allied forces consolidated DPs into large collective groups. Many DP camps had previously been work camps or even concentration camps during the war: their ability to house large numbers of DPs after the war made them attractive to the military administration. Large rooms in former army barracks or other large buildings often housed a number of families; spaces were divided by hanging blankets in order to create a semblance of privacy.

The DP camps varied in their condition. Despite repairs by relief teams, the shortage of materials and the length of occupation meant that some camps remained in a dire condition. Margaret McNeill, a relief worker with the Friends Relief Service (Quakers), described one camp as 'a cluster of dilapidated hencoops'. Whilst many relief workers questioned the use of Displaced Persons camps, alternative accommodation was in short supply. Fighting across Europe and strategic bombing by both Allied and Axis powers had contributed to a housing crisis on an unimaginable scale. In the British Zone of Germany only two-thirds of former dwellings were still habitable. This situation was made more acute

with the arrival of over 12 million ethnic Germans expelled from Eastern Europe under the terms of the Yalta and Potsdam agreements.

Relief teams worried that without access to employment or social activities that DPs would lack purpose in their lives. Many believed that keeping the DPs occupied was vital in maintaining their self-respect. If they could not find them work outside DP camps, relief workers assisted in the establishment of cobblers, tailors and carpentry workshops. Those employed were paid through the sale of goods, and the use of salvaged and donated materials in the construction of items kept prices low and affordable to DPs in the camps. As well as sustaining traditional crafts, many relief organisations supported the preservation of national cultures and revival of religions. Relief workers assisted the construction of churches and attended religious and cultural ceremonies organised by the displaced persons.

Whilst relief workers believed in the importance of maintaining national cultures, many worried that in the context of nationality segregated camps, the impact would be the forging of 'competitive nationalism' both in and between the camps. Voluntary organisations like the Friends Relief Service believed it their duty to maintain this 'unending vigilance', and through clubs, parties and discussion groups hoped to inspire some measure of international understanding.

This series of briefing papers is based on a research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and conducted by historians at the University of Manchester and the University of Nottingham on East European population displacement and resettlement after the Second World War.

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

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