

When the war was over:

European refugees after 1945



Briefing Paper 7. World Refugee Year, 1959-60

World Refugee Year (WRY) was an ambitious attempt by the UN, by governments (mostly in the First World) and NGOs to increase public awareness of enduring refugee situations and to find solutions such as resettlement or local integration that would improve the lives of refugees around the world, not just in Europe but also in the Middle East, Hong Kong and China. In addition, it was hoped to improve the visibility of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and to get more governments to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention. A particular focus was the plight of DPs and refugees who were still living in camps and other sub-standard accommodation in Germany, Austria, Italy and Greece, 15 years after the end of the war. More than 60 countries participated in the campaign between June 1959 and June 1960. Britain played a prominent part, as did other countries including Norway, Sweden, Germany, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Soviet bloc countries refused to have anything to do with WRY, on the grounds that the 'refugee problem' in Europe could be resolved at a stroke if Western governments did more to encourage DPs from Eastern Europe to return to their homes.

According to the UN office for WRY, public opinion had become familiar with refugees in the abstract: 'through frequent repetition, the word 'refugee' had come to lose much of its poignancy, and there was little personal knowledge of the plight and sufferings of refugees beyond the immediate areas where they were living'. WRY aimed to rectify this situation.

Various initiatives for fundraising were organised, including the simultaneous issue of first-day covers by 70 postal authorities around the world. But issuing stamps was not just about raising money; it also provided an opportunity to demonstrate attitudes and assumptions about refugees. Austria's stamp advertised the flight of Hungarians in 1956 and by extension the country's recent contribution to refugee relief. The US stamp showed a stark wall against which refugees were silhouetted, 'facing (as the publicity stated) down a long dark corridor towards a bright exit, symbolizing escape from the darkness of want and oppression into the brightness of a new life'. The imagery reinforced the point that the campaign would enable refugees to replace despair with hope, to be moved them from the deplorable camp to comfortable and modern conditions. WRY stamps allowed 'the refugee story [to be] told, a story always beginning with flight and despair, and ending, sometimes, in hope and resettlement'.

In addition to stamps, films and photos played a vital part in drawing attention to the plight of refugees and to the assistance provided by the UN and non-governmental organisations in removing them from camps and placing them in decent accommodation. The UN told stories of refugees who had lost hope, but who could thanks to WRY now anticipate a better future. One powerful image designed to launch the campaign showed a young refugee girl – on the next page was an advert for a package holiday, making a contrast between desperate poverty and pleasurable consumption.

By 1960s most camps for the 'hard core' had been closed, and DPs were either resettled or moved to more modern accommodation. The profile of the UNHCR was enhanced. The British government described it as 'the most universal short-term humanitarian enterprise the world has yet seen'. There were utopian elements to the campaign, although it soon dawned on participants that new refugee crises were beginning to emerge, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, although Palestinian refugees and Tibetan refugees received some relief packages and funds for various projects, the campaign did not (and was not designed to) meet their basic aspirations for the restitution of their 'homeland'. Although WRY did not offer permanent solutions, it provided an opportunity for members of the public to understand something of the struggles faced by refugees on a daily basis. It is worth recalling the words of the UNHCR representative in Austria, who commented that 'nothing is easier than considering the refugees after a while as a pest or as troublesome aliens. In reality they are neither heroes nor inferior individuals. They are quite ordinary people like everybody else, but they are living in extraordinary conditions'.

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