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## POST-WAR EUROPE: REFUGEES, EXILE AND RESETTLEMENT, 1945-1950

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This online archive delivers essential primary sources for the study and understanding of the challenges facing the European peoples in the aftermath of World War II. It covers the politics and administration of the post war refugee crisis in Europe well as the day-to-day survival of the refugees themselves. Although the War in Europe ended officially in May 1945, the struggle continued for the millions of homeless people who had been displaced as a result of military action, deportation into labour or concentration camps, local racism and discrimination or the relocation of national borders. The burden of the refugee problem taxed the Allied governments and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) relief groups in their attempts to administer, feed and house a moving people searching for their lost families and a permanent home. A rapid repatriation programme was organised but many Displaced Persons (DPs) could not or would not return to their homelands. Emigration programmes struggled against the reluctance of nations outside Europe to assist in the resolution of this humanitarian catastrophe.

**Date Range:** 1945-1950

**Content:** 119,962 images

**Source Library:** The National Archives of the UK

### **Detailed Description:**

Link to [Post War Europe Resources](#)

The documents collected here reveal the sheer scale of the problem of Displaced Persons was not just because of the enormous figures involved, but because of the seemingly intractable political problems. Jessica Reinisch notes in her essay that of the 5,800,000 DPs in Germany at the end of the war, 2,326,000 had been returned to their countries of origin within months. And there were millions more, who could not be classed as DPs, including Soviet nationals. By 1953 some five and a half million of the latter, according to the terms of the Yalta agreement, were forcibly repatriated. But there remained tens of thousands for whom such an option was not just undesirable, but fiercely resisted, which is hardly surprising

when one considers that one in five Soviet returnees were either shot or deported to the Gulag. These were the so-called 'non-repatriable refugees'. They included many Poles who refused to return to a Poland that was being taken over by communists. And many Jews found that they were unwelcome in their pre-war homes in Eastern Europe; although not technically DPs, some 220,000 Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe 'infiltrated' their way into the DP camps, swelling their numbers substantially in the first two years after the war. Coupled with a widespread desire among Jewish DPs to emigrate to Palestine, a desire that was resisted by the British mandate authorities, this all meant that what were originally conceived of as places of temporary shelter, turned out to be long-term homes for the war's displaced. It is one of the great ironies of the Holocaust that many of its surviving victims spent the next years of their lives in camps in the lands of the perpetrators; in some cases in the immediate aftermath of the War they even shared the camps with imprisoned Nazi perpetrators and, in the case of German-Jewish DPs, were regarded as 'enemy DPs' and subjected to the Allies non-fraternization policy (see Arieh Kochavi's and Rainer Schulze's essays in *Resources*).

Many of the documents collected here reveal the ambivalence of the Allies' policies towards DPs. Whilst many thousands of Eastern Europeans obtained entry visas to the United Kingdom or the United States, including among them 'collaborators and former members of Waffen-SS and other German detachments', Jews were for the most part left languishing behind, once again unwanted, in a sad echo of the pre-war reluctance to accept Jewish refugees from the Third Reich. The Allies engaged on the one hand in massive efforts to house, feed and clothe DPs, no mean feat at the end of the War when resources were extremely scarce and when Europe was in such a desperate state that it was unable to feed itself. At its height, in September 1945, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was caring for or arranging the repatriation of 6,795,000 liberated United Nations civilians (i.e., not including citizens of former Axis countries), and the importance of this extraordinary effort cannot be overestimated. On the other hand, the Allies displayed, at least at the start, little understanding of what DPs had gone through, with the result that they were sometimes treated callously; American war hero General George S. Patton famously earned himself his dismissal when he referred to the Jews in DP camps as 'lower than animals'. Only in August 1945 did an American report clarify that housing Jews together with their former persecutors was 'a distinctly unrealistic approach to the problem. Refusal to recognise the Jews as such has the effect of closing one's eyes to their former and barbaric persecution' leading President Truman to announce that Jews would be given separate facilities. Further policies, especially on the part of the British, certainly had the effect of thwarting the aspirations of DPs to move on either to the US or to Palestine. It is no surprise that, as time passed, relations between the DPs and the Allies, especially in the British zone, became strained.

The founding of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA, 1943) and its replacements the International Refugee Organisation (IRO, 1947) and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR, 1951) meant that DPs were cared for at the expense of the US, Canada and Britain; it also institutionalized their care, thus

prolonging it. After the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 Jewish DPs were free to go there; the continued existence of a minority of the Jewish DP population in Germany after 1948 gave the lie to the Zionist claim, dominant in the DP camps and, most significantly, among those who made their voices heard most loudly in negotiations with the Allies, that all the Jews wanted to go to Palestine (see Michael Brenner's essay in Resources). Only by the mid-1950s, when it became too embarrassing in the context of the Cold War—when the Soviet Union was no longer an ally of the West but its new enemy—to be reminded of Germany's role in World War II, did the last DP camps, still housing 177,000 people, close, the last being at Föhrenwald in Bavaria in 1957.

Those who were still in DP camps a year or two after the end of the War could, then, be regarded as 'the real ruins and wreckage of our civilization'. Despite all this, the DP camps flourished. They had the highest birth rate anywhere in Europe as Jews remarried and sought to rebuild their communities. They had schools, synagogues, and other communal institutions (see Juliane Wetzel's and Angelika Königseder's essays in Resources) working in Yiddish and Hebrew as well as the languages of Europe. It is hardly surprising to find, for example, that on the site of one former concentration camp a social experiment known as Kibbuts Buchenwald began, preparing its members for life in the future Jewish state. DPs may have been pawns in the superpowers' games, but their own vibrant lives have also been rediscovered by historians. The self-designated 'she'erit hapletah' (saving remnant or Jewish survivors of the Holocaust) keenly felt their role as seeds of a future Jewish presence in Europe, Palestine or further afield.

In the last few years scholarly attention has shifted from World War II itself to its aftermath. We have long known that World War II was the most catastrophic war in history in terms of loss of life: over forty million deaths, including about half that number civilians. But Mark Mazower reminds us that 'A total of close to ninety million people were either killed or displaced in Europe between the years 1938 and 1948.' Thus, one cannot begin to understand the post-war years if one detaches them from the years of war and Nazi occupation. The extraordinary movements of peoples, unprecedented in history, that followed the end of the War, one should recall more than twelve million Germans forced out of their homes in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the DPs, refugees, and others forcibly moved in what are euphemistically called 'population transfers', are part of the history of the twentieth century in Europe, not an isolated episode.

Furthermore, the end of the Cold War also meant the end of the guiding ideologies of the post-war period, that is to say, the end of the 'post-war consensus' both in Western and Eastern Europe. In Eastern Europe, from as early as 1944 with the advance of the Red Army but definitively by 1948 with the communist takeover of the countries behind Churchill's 'iron curtain', 'anti-fascism' was the official line. This meant that 'enemies of the people', that is, landowners and factory-owners as well as proven collaborators, were executed or deported as reconstruction was used as an opportunity for the new communist rulers to reshape society. In Western Europe, new welfare states combined with a socially conservative Christian Democracy to place a new emphasis on consumerism and—after an initial wave of

surprisingly mild purges—a sweeping under the carpet of the true extent of collaboration and indigenous fascism before 1945.

An important aspect of this reassessment of the post-war years focuses on the immediate aftermath of the years, in order to present a nuanced and detailed picture of the population movements underway at that time. The files here represent a remarkable collection that will allow students and scholars to address many of the themes mentioned so far, from the social life of the DP camps to the machinations of the great powers from the World War II to the Cold War concerning the control of populations. As a resource the collection is unparalleled, permitting research on the policies of the great powers acting together and individually with respect to single countries; the development of international regulation of, and law regarding, DPs, refugees, and minorities; the history of the dispersal and absorption of the displaced across the world, from Northern Rhodesia to the Philippines; the development of the United Nations; occupation policy in occupied Germany, Austria and Italy; the link between Zionism among the survivors and British policy in Palestine; illegal immigration to Palestine; and the British response to it; restitution claims made by Israel against West Germany and the run-up to the Luxembourg Treaty of 1952; and the development of the DP camps themselves, whether with respect to Allied health policy or the transmission of communist ideology within the camps. There is an enormous amount of material here for original research at all levels and in all varieties of history: diplomatic, military, political, economic, social, cultural, intellectual, as well as scope for using the material for investigating issues as wide-ranging as disease, religion, language, children, the black market or post-war trials. The historiography of the immediate post-war years, though it has grown enormously since 1989, is still in its infancy. This collection puts in the hands of scholars a resource that can only enhance future research.

[taken from the introduction by Professor Dan Stone, Royal Holloway, University of London in Resources (See link at the start of this text)]