MIGRATIONS AND PERSECUTIONS

Refugee Resettlement in the United States after World War II

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ABSTRACT

After having been very reluctant to welcome European refugees fleeing Nazism during World War II, the United States changed its policy after the war in response to the scope of the problem of the Displaced Persons (DPs), refugees who refused repatriation after the end of the conflict. The 1948 Displaced Persons Act established a major resettlement program that enabled nearly 400,000 Europeans, primarily from Eastern Europe, to become legal residents of the United States.

SHIP TO FREEDOM!

1. “Film of Displaced Persons Boarding a Ship in Bremerhaven, Germany,” 1948. Copyright of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Julien Bryan.

WELCOME TO THE FIRST D P EMIGRANTS TO THE U.S.
BREMERHAVEN PORT OF EMBARKATION

2. “Ugo Carusi, Chairman of the Displaced Persons Commission, delivers a speech at the port of Bremerhaven before the departure of the *General Black* for New York,” October 1948. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Source Record ID: 111-SC-310867 (Album 5295).

3. Photos from “Hometown Stories” of DPs having obtained a visa for the United States, International Refugee Organization Public Information Bureau, 1949-1951. AJ/3/675, Records of the IRO, Archives nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine.

On October 30, 1948, 813 refugees arrived in New York from Bremerhaven, Germany, aboard the *USS General Black*. They would be the first of nearly 400,000 refugees resettled by the U.S. federal government between 1948 and 1952. The story of that ship stands in sharp contrast with that of another ship carrying refugees from Germany less than a decade earlier. In 1939, the *MS St. Louis*, with over 900 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany on board, was refused entrance, first to Cuba, then to the United States. That contrast is a testament to the transformation of the American political environment, which had made it impossible to take in 900 refugees in 1939, but possible a few years later to resettle nearly 400,000 of them in the context of the first large-scale government refugee resettlement program in the United States.

Assisting “DPs”: The Humanitarian Stakes

At the end of World War II, there were 8 million displaced persons (DPs) in Germany, Austria, and Italy. Through cooperation between the Allied powers and the newly formed United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation

Administration (UNRRA), nearly 7 million of these displaced persons were repatriated to their home country. At the end of this vast undertaking, only those who refused to return to the country they had come from remained. By the end of 1946, Allied military authorities estimated that there were one million war refugees living in the three countries.

The responsibility for this remaining million fell to the International Refugee Organization, which had taken over from UNRRA in June 1947 and turned from organizing repatriation to dealing with emigration. The IRO instituted procedures for identifying the displaced persons who fell under their purview, providing them with material assistance and organizing their resettlement in other countries. The organization also ran a sprawling network of refugee camps, ranging from northern Germany to Sicily, with 707,000 people living in them. From then on, DPs were no longer considered temporarily displaced persons, but refugees seeking a stable destination.

These displaced persons were a heterogenous group, and their reasons for refusing repatriation varied. Approximately 20% of them were Jews of different nationalities – some who had survived Nazi camps, others who had gone underground to survive the war, most having survived by fleeing to the east. Many of the DPs were Polish (400,000), from the Baltic states (200,000) or Ukrainians; they had been brought to Germany as forced laborers during the war, had fled the advance of the Russian Army to the west, or had been conscripts or voluntary recruits in the German armed forces. In 1946 and 1947, the ranks of those persons displaced by war swelled with new arrivals: Jews who had returned home, but left again due to continuing anti-Semitism, particularly the wave of pogroms in Poland in 1946; as well as populations fleeing the establishment of new Communist regimes in the Eastern bloc.

Some categories of displaced persons were excluded from the IRO’s protection, including ethnic Germans and populations displaced by borders being redrawn in Yugoslavia, Poland and elsewhere. Anti-fascist criteria were also applied, excluding those who had volunteered to assist the Axis powers during the war. Lastly, DPs had to provide “valid objections” to being sent home. Those included “persecution, or a reasonable fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality or political opinion.”

The American DP Act: The Geopolitical Stakes

The IRO set to work organizing emigration to various countries in Europe, Latin America, Palestine and North America for those million DPs. The United States was the country that took in the single largest number.

Immigration policy in the United States, which was based on a quota system, had been very restrictive since the 1920s. Since before the war, immigration restrictionists had dominated the debate about taking in refugees fleeing Nazi Germany, and very few of them were allowed in. After the war, Americans began to consider their country’s humanitarian duty to European refugees. Several reports about the DPs’ living conditions, as well as growing awareness of the atrocities of the Holocaust, generated pressure on the authorities.

Europe’s one million remaining DPs also posed a problem for the United States. It was a financial burden, since many of the DP camps were in zones occupied by the Americans, and the United States was the IRO's largest funder. In addition, while the United States was focused on rebuilding Europe – this was the period of the Marshall Plan – the presence of a million refugees was seen as creating a potential risk for the region's economic and political stability.

Taking in the DPs also presented certain geopolitical advantages: most of them came from Communist countries. The USSR, Poland and Yugoslavia opposed emigration for their citizens and insisted on their being sent home, while the United States, France and the United Kingdom – the countries occupying the zones where the DPs were living – refused to force refugees to go back. The Communist countries had withdrawn from the IRO as soon as it was created. Welcoming refugees fleeing Communist regimes was a way for the United States to stand up to the Eastern bloc in the context of an emerging Cold War, while at the same time casting themselves as humanitarian role models and defenders of human rights.

In 1948, the American Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act, which was later amended and extended until 1952, allocating up to 400,000 visas. In order to be eligible for emigration, applicants had to meet certain criteria: being officially under the aegis of the IRO, meeting standard American immigration requirements, such as health requirements, having an assurance of employment that would not displace another worker, or else proving that an American or a charity could ensure that they would not be dependent on government aid. Lastly, they needed to prove that they were not members of subversive organizations and had never willingly borne arms against the United States. An overwhelming majority of DPs obtained those guarantees through voluntary agencies, most of which were faith-based, such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. As the program continued and the Cold War intensifed, anti-Communism came to replace anti-Fascism as the main political criterion for selecting DPs for emigration to the United States.

The DP resettlement program faced stiff opposition from the most conservative factions in American politics. Despite the program's stated anti-Communist objectives, many politicians – following the lead of Senator Pat McCarran (1876-1954), the influential Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee – were adamant that the DPs represented a threat of subversion. In 1950, McCarran published a text describing the resettlement program as a "dangerous threat to the security of the United States that would be another loophole for the infiltration of Communist agents."

Despite that opposition, the DP program achieved its objective and enabled the resettlement of 393,542 European refugees between 1948 and 1952. As the first large-scale governmental refugee-resettlement program in the United States, it laid the foundations for refugee-resettlement programs for decades to come, until the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, which established an annual allotment of refugee visas.

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