

# The Politics of Displaced Persons in Post-War Europe, 1945-1950

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**Summary:** Professor Kochavi discusses political problems generated by the huge number of Displaced Persons in need of assistance at the end of World War II. These include the demands on the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and the pressure put on the British Government to permit emigration of the Jewish DPs to Palestine.

Within a few months after the end of World War II, it was clear to Britain that many of the Jews who had survived the Holocaust could not or did not want to return to the countries in Eastern Europe that had become their families' graveyard and to rehabilitate themselves there, but wished instead to go to Palestine or to resettle overseas. Between 1945 and 1948, more than a quarter of a million Jews fled from countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans mainly to Germany and Austria, where they were given temporary shelter in the Displaced Persons (DP) camps that were hastily erected by the Allies. Approximately 70,000 of these Holocaust survivors tried to reach the shores of Palestine through clandestine sailings from both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Tangible preparations for dealing with the overall DP problem had already been set in motion during the war. In November 1943, representatives of 44 countries met at the White House and established the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Its objective was to provide food, clothing, medical supplies, and other forms of assistance to those awaiting repatriation. The task of repatriating the millions of DPs fell upon the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) in Germany and Austria. SHAEF [WO 204/3521, p. 18-19 and FO 1039/598, p. 79] commanders were asked to set up camps and assembly points where DPs from Allied countries would stay until they could be returned to their own countries. Ideally DPs were to be assigned to separate camps on the basis of nationality while DPs unable to be repatriated were to be assembled in special centres suitable for a longer stay. SHAEF ceased functioning in mid-July 1945, and responsibility for the care of the DPs was transferred to the victorious nations – the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union,

and France – each in their respective occupation zones in Germany and Austria

When the various armies withdrew to their occupation zones in Germany, approximately 3,900,000 refugees had already been repatriated. Almost without exception, citizens of Western European countries – France, Holland, Luxembourg, and Belgium – had chosen to return home. Following the agreement reached at Yalta, Soviet citizens were returned irrespective of their personal wishes. In contrast, the number of returning Poles [WO 204/3500, p.4 and p.101] – the second largest national group of DPs after the Russians – was negligible. Altogether, approximately 1,300,000 DPs still lived in camps supervised by the Allied armies or by UNRRA in the British, American, and French-occupied zones in Germany in the winter of 1945. Though eager to solve the DP problem as quickly as possible, both the British and the Americans remained opposed to forced repatriation. Between November 1945 and the end of June 1947, when UNRRA ceased functioning, approximately 860,000 more DPs were repatriated from Western Germany. In the spring of 1947, this organization had operated 762 DP centres in Germany, 416 of which were in the American zone and 272 in the British. On 1 July 1947, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) took over from UNRRA. During the four and a half years of its operation, IRO resettled more than one million DPs, in addition to repatriating some 72,000 DPs.

Among the hardcore DPs, those who could not or did not want to be repatriated, were the Jewish DPs. At the end of 1945, Jews constituted about five percent of all DPs in Germany. However, as time passed, their percentage increased because of the repatriation of non-Jewish DPs, on the one hand, and the arrival of tens of thousands of Jews who had fled Eastern Europe, on the other. By the end of 1947, Jewish DPs constituted about 25 percent of the

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total number of displaced persons in the three occupation zones of West Germany. Most of these refugees were located in the American zone because Eastern European Jews for the most part avoided the British zone owing to London's refusal to grant DP status to newcomers.

British policy toward the Jewish DPs stemmed from Britain's interests in the Middle East, a region that was pivotal both economically – because of its huge oil resources – and strategically because it helped to secure the land route to India and, importantly, formed a buffer against the expansionist ambitions of the Soviet Union. In order to retain their position in the Middle East, the British were determined to obtain the cooperation of the Arab countries in the region. Because the latter had made Jewish immigration into Palestine a touchstone of Anglo-Arab relations, Whitehall decided to limit Jewish immigration to that land. As a result, Britain now became the main barrier to Jewish refugees seeking to reach Palestine.

The Zionists counteracted by, among other things, dispatching tens of thousands of illegal immigrants, as the British called them, from various European ports to Palestine, while directing larger numbers of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe to DP camps in Germany and Austria. For the Zionists, the Jewish DP problem offered, *inter alia*, an effective political weapon in their battle for Palestine. To halt DP movements effectively, the British needed the cooperation of both Eastern and Western European governments and, even more so, the backing and collaboration of the Americans.

Washington would not cooperate. US policy toward the Jewish DPs played a crucial role in Britain's failure to keep the Palestine question separate from the Jewish DP problem. President Truman's demand that 100,000 Jewish DPs be transferred to Palestine created the link between the Jewish DP problem in Europe and the question of Palestine that British policy-makers had striven so determinedly to avoid. The President's guidelines on how Jewish DPs in the American occupation zones ought to be treated – which included opening up the camps for Jews fleeing from Eastern Europe, granting them DP status, and separating Jewish DPs from the others – served the Zionists' claim that all Jewish DPs, regardless

of their country of origin, were part of a single nation, the Jewish people, for whom Zionism was creating a state in Palestine.

Public dissension between Britain and the US over a policy toward the Jewish DPs undermined the effectiveness of the pressure that the British were trying to exert on certain European countries, such as France and Italy that were tolerating the illegal movement of Jews across their territories. These countries were not the only problem for the British, however. American military authorities in Germany and Austria, seeking to minimize the number of DPs in their occupation zones and to lessen the economic burden of their upkeep, were indirectly assisting the DPs to move on toward ports of embarkation in France and Italy. This open contention with the US, furthermore, diluted the efficacy of British demands that Soviet bloc countries prevent the exodus of Jews both by sea to Palestine and by land to DP camps in Germany and Austria.

The largest number of potential Jewish emigrants at the end of World War II could be found in countries within the sphere of Soviet influence, as could the routes to the American and British occupation zones in Germany and Austria. Within two years after the War, more than 160,000 Jews had fled from Poland; tens of thousands of them following the pogrom in the Polish town of Kielce on 4 July 1946, during which 41 of the 250 Jews who had settled in that city after the War were murdered. In 1947 the great majority of the escapees from the Soviet bloc consisted of Rumanian Jews fleeing via Hungary to Austria. Thousands of these DPs subsequently took part in the illegal immigration to Palestine from the shores of Italy, France, and Greece. Ports in the Balkan countries also served as embarkation bases, with more than 29,000 illegal immigrants sailing from Rumanian, Yugoslavian, and Bulgarian harbours. Such movement from countries under Soviet influence could only have taken place with the knowledge and unofficial consent of the governments of these countries, and of Moscow.

The British were convinced that by prodding the Jews to head for the DP camps in Germany and Austria, the Soviets were trying to exacerbate the Jewish DP problem and thus widen differences of opinion between Britain and the US over an acceptable solution to the problem,

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with ultimate harm to Britain's standing in the US. Enabling tens of thousands of Jews to sail to Palestine was regarded in London as part of Moscow's overall effort [FO 371/52635-0012, p. 4 and FO 1049/418, p. 24] to undermine Britain's position in the Middle East, then have it ousted from Palestine and so obtain a foothold in the region for itself.

The desire to harm British interests indeed was common to all Soviet satellites. Yet, the mass exodus of Jews from countries under Soviet influence was made possible in large part through a rare convergence of the interests of those countries themselves, the USSR, the Jews in those countries, and the Zionist movement. In contrast to British claims, the Soviets did not push the Jews to leave; most Jews did not need 'encouragement' in this direction, whether by local authorities or by the Zionists.

The British learned to their dismay that even though Italy and France were on the western side of the Iron Curtain, this had not necessarily made them more responsive to London's entreaties. More than half of the illegal immigrants – approximately 37,000 – who sailed for Palestine between the end of the War and May 1948 embarked from Mediterranean ports. Most of these refugees had come from Eastern and Central European countries and had made it into Italy and France either through the Allied occupation zones in Germany and Austria or through Yugoslavia. Of the 56 illegal immigrant ships [WO 204/49, pp. 59-60 and FO 371/52635-0005, pp. 3-4] that sailed between the end of the War and the establishment of the State of Israel, 34 vessels, carrying more than 21,000 persons or about 30 percent of the total, set out from Italy.

Britain's campaign to halt the illegal movement from Italy was waged on two fronts: the first against Jews infiltrating into Italy from the north, and the second against Jewish DPs who had arrived in Italy and from there were attempting to sail for Palestine. Italy began attracting Holocaust survivors from Eastern and Central Europe as soon as it became known that the Palestinian Jewish Brigade was stationed in that country. Brigade soldiers helped Jewish refugees who had managed to reach Italy in the migratory wave that swept over Europe at the end of the War and also assisted in smuggling Jews

across the Austrian border into Italy. The transfer of the refugee camps in Italy to the supervision of UNRRA, which delegated much of its authority to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), had the effect of aiding Zionist emissaries in Italy to receive the parties of illegal immigrants after they had crossed the northern frontiers. These emissaries then arranged for the dispatch of the refugees to the camps and for their clandestine embarkation to Palestine. Of the nearly 50,000 Jewish refugees who entered Italy illegally, approximately 40 percent continued to Palestine.

Success in the struggle against the illegal sailings depended in large part upon the cooperation of the Italian authorities. Given British-Italian relations after the War, however, the Italians invested no more than minimal efforts in trying to halt these movements. Although they were interested in preventing Jewish refugees from entering their country, Italian authorities attached only secondary importance to the struggle against such infiltration, because the burden of supporting the refugees fell on UNRRA, not on their own shaky economy. Furthermore, it was clear to them that the Jewish DPs entering Italy intended not to stay but to continue to Palestine.

The French and Italian authorities, despite the differences in the international status of their two countries, displayed considerable similarity in their reaction to British entreaties regarding Jewish illegal immigration. Britain attributed the willingness to aid the Jewish refugees to the sympathy that government officials in those two countries, as well as wide circles of the general public, felt toward the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, on the one hand, and to the resentment that many harboured toward Britain because of its stand on geopolitical issues, on the other. The difficulties that the British encountered in the Middle East as a result of the illegal sailings can hardly have been a source of regret in Rome and Paris. Approximately one quarter of the ships that participated in clandestine sailings after the War sailed from French harbours, the illegal immigrants having entered France via Allied occupation zones in Germany and Austria or through Belgium. France, moreover, served as an important base for fitting out vessels that took part in these sailings, even if not from French ports.

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As it happened, the British found it difficult to implement their policy toward Jewish DPs even in their own zone of occupation. British policy involved, among others, the insistence that the Jewish DP problem should be dealt with as part of the general DP problem, the refusal to single out Jewish refugees from the other DPs in separate camps, the withholding of recognition from a united representative body of all Jewish DPs including German Jews, the resettlement of German Jews in Germany, and opposition to the appointment of Jewish liaison officers. Following pressure from Jewish organizations in Britain and criticism of Britain's policies in the American press, London in mid-April 1946 reluctantly appointed Col Robert Solomon, an attorney and a past chairman of the Jewish National Fund in Britain, to the position of advisor for Jewish affairs in Germany. By appointing Solomon, Whitehall in effect recognized that there was a common denominator that bound all Jewish DPs together, irrespective of country of origin, and this included the German Jews. Moreover, faced with the continuing friction between Jewish and Polish DPs in Bergen-Belsen (Höhne), British authorities decided in the summer of 1946 to remove the non-Jewish Poles, with the result that the camp in effect became an exclusively Jewish DP camp.

In the struggle over the clandestine sailings to Palestine, there were no clear winners. The British succeeded in apprehending most of the illegal immigrants who embarked for Palestine. About 51,000 of the approximately 70,000 refugees who set sail for Palestine after the end of World War II were intercepted and deported to detention camps in Cyprus and even, in the famous case of the Exodus 1947 ship, back to Germany. From the Zionist perspective, however, the fact that tens of thousands of refugees had succeeded in embarking for Palestine was in itself a considerable achievement, especially since all the detainees eventually reached either Palestine or, later, Israel. Moreover, British acts against the illegal immigrants at times received worldwide media coverage, thereby helping the Zionists to prevent the Jewish DP problem from sinking into oblivion, especially when the United States and the European governments were preoccupied with rehabilitating their countries and with the battle over

the shape of the post-war world. It was Britain's unfortunate circumstance that both the White House and the Kremlin, albeit for entirely different motives, supported the goals of the Zionists. With the establishment of the new State in May 1948, the overwhelming majority of all Jewish DPs immigrated to Israel.



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## Further Reading:

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