

Preparing for a New World Order: UNRRA and the International Management of Refugees

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Summary: Dr Reinisch relates the history of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, how it was organised, its role in the administration of the Displaced Person camps and repatriation programmes for DPs.

The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was the first truly international organisation set up during World War II to manage the transition from war to peace and to build a new world order. It predated the United Nations Organisation by two years. UNRRA was a temporary body to provide liberated populations with aid and relief, and to make arrangements for the return of refugees and prisoners to their home countries. During its five-year existence UNRRA helped to define lasting approaches to reconstruction, resettlement and political asylum. The documents in this collection give insights into UNRRA's extensive operations from the perspective of British and American government departments collaborating or working in parallel with UNRRA, and from that of a number of smaller relief bodies, which operated under UNRRA's supervision. The documents represent four main themes: (i) war-time planning for post-war relief in the government departments, (ii) UNRRA's structure, constitution and mandate, (iii) UNRRA's day-to-day work in the DP camps in Central Europe and its contact with the military authorities, (iv) and UNRRA's role in international diplomacy and the formulation of repatriation and resettlement policy.

Post-War Planning

After 1940, 'post-conflict planning' in London and Washington assumed that the mistakes of the First World War and the interwar years were not to be repeated. The League of Nations, set up by the Versailles Treaty of 1919, had failed to preserve international peace. It had also failed to deal with refugee problems or to address the root causes of flight and resettlement. Fridtjof Nansen's efforts as High Commissioner for Refugees to bring refugees under international protection had met concerted opposition from some member states. Nansen's Office and all successor bodies, including the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (founded in 1938), had been

crippled by a lack of funding and political support.

The challenge for planning committees was now to design a new framework that could prevent another catastrophe and safeguard world security and international collaboration. The idea of resurrecting the old League was rejected early on, and planning committees instead began to draw up blueprints for a completely new international organisation. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt suggested that any post-war peace would have to be maintained by the 'Four Policemen' – the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain and China. Efforts to commit the Big Four to a postwar international organisation received a boost in January 1942, when 26 governments issued a 'Declaration by the United Nations'. The signatories pledged to uphold the Atlantic Charter and agreed not to accept a separate peace with the Axis countries. For the rest of the war, the term 'United Nations' was used to describe the joint efforts by the Allied nations to defeat fascism and Nazism.

However, it also became clear that before a new framework for lasting international peace and security could be negotiated and implemented, a major temporary relief and rehabilitation programme would have to deal with the most serious consequences of the war. Reports on the dire conditions in Europe warned that the relief problem would be much worse than it had been after 1919. The [FO 1052/266, p. 65 and FO 1052/321, p. 60] on the continent would produce a famine far exceeding that in the Volga region in 1921-1922. The potential for an epidemic crisis was at least as severe as it had been when the Influenza pandemic hit the world in 1918-1919. And the refugee problem was also far greater in magnitude, as millions of people had fled or been expelled from their homes. The redrawing of national boundaries and a series of compulsory population transfers affected millions of Poles, Ukrainians, Czechoslovaks, Hungarians, Soviets,

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Yugoslavs, Italians, Bulgarians, Romanians, and Germans. The German minorities in Eastern Europe had been important building blocks of the Third Reich's foreign policy and efforts to build new racial order. In addition, over 10 million slave labourers had been deported by the Nazis from their homes to work in German factories, mines and agriculture. Malcolm Proudfoot later calculated that over 60 million Europeans were moved from their homes during the War or immediate post-war period.¹

A number of Allied organisations thus planned for relief work and humanitarian problems. Most important was the Inter-Allied Committee on Post-War Requirements (the Leith-Ross Committee), established in London in September 1941, which tabulated the needs and requirements of the liberated territories in Europe. The Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations of the US Department of State, established in November 1942 under the leadership of Herbert H. Lehmann (former Governor of New York), was also a joint Anglo-American initiative and oversaw relief work in French North Africa.

These experiences soon demonstrated that the enormous problems of post-war relief would require much wider international collaboration. Washington pressed for a broadly international relief body, but the Soviets were reluctant to surrender their freedom of action in such a forum. As a compromise, SHAEF agreed that Soviet nationals would be segregated from the other refugees in special centres run by Soviet officers and repatriated regardless of their wishes. Dean Acheson (Assistant Secretary of State) further negotiated with Moscow, and discussions then broadened to include other governments. By the autumn 1943, formal agreement had been reached to establish UNRRA.

Organisation

On 9 November 1943, 44 nations signed an agreement to establish UNRRA at a conference in Washington. Its main tasks were to 'plan, co-ordinate, administer or arrange for the administration of measures for the relief of victims of war in any area under the control of any of the United Nations through the provision of food, fuel, clothing, shelter and other basic necessities,

medical and other essential services'.² It was to offer countries assistance in the resumption of urgently needed agricultural and industrial production, and the restoration of essential services. Finally, it was to make arrangements for the return of prisoners and exiles to their homes.³ From the start UNRRA had been intended as a temporary body, whose scope and authority was closely defined and limited. Reconstructing the world was outside its remit, but its founders also wanted it to provide more than mere 'soup kitchen' charity. It was not to reconstruct, but to provide relief and means for rehabilitation. As such, 'UNRRA might restore water supply systems damaged by bombing, but could not install a new sewage system in a town which never had a sewage system'.⁴

The 10 Articles in the UNRRA Agreement set out the body's carefully crafted constitution and structure. They provided for: (i) a Council, on which each member government was represented and which was to meet not less than twice yearly; (ii) a Central Committee, on which China, the USSR, the UK and the US were represented, and which made policy decisions between the Council Sessions; and (iii) a Director-General, to serve as the overall executive and administrative officer, who was responsible for UNRRA's staff of almost 30,000 people worldwide. Although the General Council was the policy-determining organ of the organisation, in practice authority for both policy formation and execution became centralised in the Central Committee. UNRRA policy and guidelines were prepared in a series of standing committees, regional committees and technical sub-committees. Headquarters were set up in Washington, DC, and a European Regional Office was opened in London. Three Americans acted as Director-Generals during the organisation's five-year existence: Herbert H. Lehmann served from 1 January 1944 until 31 March 1946; the mayor of New York City, Fiorello LaGuardia, served from 1 April 1946 until 31 December 1946; and Major-General Lowell P. Rooks served from 1 January 1947 until 30 September 1948.

The Agreement gave UNRRA the authority to plan, coordinate and implement measures for the relief of war-victims in areas liberated from axis control. It had power to acquire, hold and convey property, to enter into contracts and to undertake obligations appropriate to its purpose.

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In areas still under military control, UNRRA had to obtain consent from the military authorities. Elsewhere, UNRRA had to be invited by the government of the area concerned; UNRRA would then negotiate an agreement, which specified what supplies it would bring and what services it would provide. National governments were UNRRA's clients and it worked through and for them, and only at their request.⁵ As Herbert Lehmann explained in February 1945: 'an intergovernmental service agency such as ours acts and must act with and through the member governments'. He thought that UNRRA could only make progress because UNRRA's 'staff at all times has been mindful of the fact that the sovereignty of the individual nation is a basic concept of action in the United Nations sphere of cooperation. It is this that distinguishes the United Nations idea from the Axis idea of new orders and co-prosperity spheres'.⁶

UNRRA's expenses were met by two separate budgets: the administrative budget and the general operating budget for supplies. Each member government agreed to contribute the approximate equivalent of 1% of its national income per year to the operating budget. In addition, governments were urged to contribute at least 10% in the form of credits in local currency available for the purchase of supplies and services in that country. The main contribution to UNRRA's overall budget was made by the US (72%). The UK contributed 24%. The USSR contributed very little. UNRRA's administrative expenses for the whole period of its existence amounted to \$47 million, just over 1% of the total. 22 million tons of supplies were shipped out by 1948. Expenses connected with UNRRA operations in liberated enemy areas were to be paid for by the enemy nation concerned, as soon as payment could be collected.

There were two main components of UNRRA's work in Europe. First, UNRRA carried out a vast Field Operation which spanned several continents. UNRRA missions in 16 receiving countries provided food, clothing, fuel, drugs, housing and staff, and supported the resumption of agricultural and industrial production. Overall, roughly half of UNRRA aid consisted of food. The main European beneficiaries were Poland, Greece, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Austria and Italy. Its single largest

European country programme took place in Poland, where it spent over \$478 million in the course of two years and shipped in 2.5 million tons of food and supplies. In most receiving countries, an important initial part of UNRRA's work consisted in emergency health and welfare provision. Second, in its Displaced Persons Operation, UNRRA provided supplies, food and personnel for the care and repatriation of the millions of displaced persons stranded in Europe outside their home countries. UNRRA teams gathered them into centres and camps in Germany, Austria and Italy, and liaised with military and national authorities about their return home. The German population was explicitly disqualified from receiving UNRRA aid.

The DP camps

UNRRA's project of caring for refugees was based on the assumption that it was only a temporary matter, before their eventual repatriation. When UNRRA teams entered Italy in mid-1944 and Germany and Austria in the spring of 1945, their first and most urgent task was to gather up the many DPs who were roaming the countryside, and to congregate them in camps or assembly centres, where they could be fed, deloused and vaccinated. In practice, camp accommodation was often extremely makeshift in character, 'frequently a euphemism designating an open field, or a bomb-gutted building, or a few tents'.⁷ UNRRA set up and managed thousands of camps in Italy and the western zones of Germany and Austria, but did not operate in the Soviet zones.

A major problem confronting UNRRA's Council, which directly affected its work in the camps, was the question of eligibility. United Nations nationals who had been forced to flee their homes or who had been shipped to the Reich made up the majority of the refugees who were eligible for material assistance and repatriation. Other eligible groups were stateless persons, UN prisoners of war, and certain categories of internally displaced Italians. Overall, the Displaced Person category [FO 371/57700-0005, p.6, and WO 204/3500, p.59], reserved for a certain class of refugees, was also a status which entitled the holder to special care and support. It contained not simply some of the people most in need of support (the emaciated survivors of concentration camps and slave labourers),

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but also those most deserving of it. Not only were former enemy nationals (including the ethnic German refugees) not eligible for UNRRA assistance, but collaboration with the Axis power also often overruled claims to eligibility on the basis of citizenship. The DP category was, as a result, fiercely contested, as many refugees tried to qualify for the benefits it entailed. UNRRA screening boards were instructed to identify collaborators and otherwise ineligible refugees, who then automatically became a responsibility of the German and Austrian authorities.

During the spring and summer 1945, the ranks of the DPs already in Germany and Austria were further increased by thousands of refugees fleeing from Eastern European countries. Refugees who entered the American zones before 1 August 1945 were granted the DP status if they otherwise complied with the eligibility criteria; in the British zones the cut-off point was 1 June 1946. As it became clear that many of the refugees would stay longer than anticipated, the camps were turned into more permanent installations and equipped with nurseries, kindergartens, schools, vocational training centres, shops, hospitals and specialists clinics. UNRRA was a major employer of DPs. But although UNRRA's mission was 'to help the DPs to help themselves', in practice it relied on German employees (including cooks, cleaners, carpenters, tailors and physicians) to run the camps. UNRRA's relations with the military authorities in Germany and Austria were often strained, not least since UNRRA was largely dependent on military supplies.

Repatriation

Repatriation proceeded very quickly during the first weeks after the end of war, and by early July, 2,326,000 of the 5,800,000 DPs in Germany had returned to their home countries.⁸ But while the repatriation of Western European nationals proved unproblematic, it soon appeared that many of the Displaced Persons from Poland, the Soviet Union and the Baltic states refused to be repatriated to areas now under Soviet or Communist control. This produced clashes between the Western and Eastern member governments within UNRRA's Council. The Soviet Union argued that only 'collaborationists' would refuse to be return, and insisted on the repatriation

of every citizen to his home country, regardless of the individual's wishes. Other member states pointed out that they could not supply the DP camps for an indefinite period of time. London and Washington opposed forced repatriation, but had agreed with the USSR in October 1944 that all Soviet citizens would be returned. Matters were further complicated by the fact that UNRRA only had a mandate to care for the DPs awaiting their repatriation, and had no authority to care for those who refused to return, or to put in place resettlement schemes.

By the summer of 1945, almost 1.5 million refugees had expressed their unwillingness to be repatriated.⁹ Twelve months later, repatriation had slowed almost to a standstill. In February 1947, there were still 264,000 DPs in the British zone of Germany, 367,000 DPs in the American zone, and 36,000 in the French zone.¹⁰ The Soviet authorities claimed that UNRRA assistance in fact encouraged DPs to resist repatriation, and demanded that UNRRA desisted from giving aid to those who refused to return.¹¹ But even UNRRA's institution of a Sixty Day Ration Plan, according to which all DPs willing to be repatriated were issued with food rations for a period of two months at the frontiers of their home countries, had little effect. The files contain a series of proposals to deal with the problem of the non-repatriable refugees.¹² The tensions between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies on other issues finally led London and Washington to conclude that repatriation was no longer a viable solution to the refugee problem. The only means left open was resettlement, which was out of UNRRA's remit.

Legacy

UNRRA's DP Operation was initially to be dissolved at the end of 1946, but its mandate was then extended until 30 June 1947. The International Refugee Organisation (IRO) took over from UNRRA to deal with the non-repatriable refugees, and was itself replaced by UNHCR in 1951. UNRRA's remaining assets and personnel were distributed among the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the IRO, the World Health Organisation (WHO), and the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). UNRRA's political legacy is harder to pin down. It seems clear that UNRRA was a test case for the strength of

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support for a post-war international cooperation in the context of a new United Nations authority. Unlike its predecessors, UNRRA included both the United States and Soviet Union on its Council. Unlike its successors, it operated extensively in Eastern Europe. Jan Masaryk [search: Masaryk], for example, thought in March 1944 that the successes of UNRRA as ‘the first great agency of the United Nations’ would have ‘great repercussions on the new forms of international organisation which will follow rapidly as we approach the end of the war and the beginning of the great era of reconstruction’.¹³

As Cold War tensions escalated, the Americans claimed that relief supplies had become political weapons and were used by hostile governments to entrench themselves.¹⁴ The Cold War thus made UNRRA’s work increasingly untenable. Although UNRRA had a short life, it occupied the minds of those who formulated later aid schemes. It provided direct lessons for the Marshall Plan, that ambitious and far-reaching American initiative to sponsor the recovery and reconstruction of Western and Southern Europe, which was initiated just as UNRRA was being dissolved. The lack of American political control over UNRRA operations in Eastern Europe prompted Undersecretary of State, William Clayton, to say of the future Marshall Plan that, this time, ‘The United States must run this show!’.¹⁵ While the Marshall Plan itself did not explicitly distinguish between Western and Eastern spheres, the logic behind it undoubtedly did. Marshall aid, unlike UNRRA provisions, were not accepted by Eastern European countries, and the Soviet Union was not involved. It left no room for doubt about American commitment to the security of Western Europe.

Citation:

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Notes:

- [1] For example, FO 1052/302, Liaison notes, Director of DP Branch to HQ, Combined Displaced Persons Executive (CDPX), BAOR, 1 September 1945; Malcolm Proudfoot, *European Refugees, 1939-1952: a study in forced population movements* (Evanston, Ill., 1956).
- [2] UNRRA Agreement, Articles 1 and 2.
- [3] *Helping the People to Help Themselves: the Story of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration*, H.M. Stationary Office, (London, 1944).
- [4] *ibid*
- [5] For example, George Woodbridge, *UNRRA: the History of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1950) Vol.1, p.12.
- [6] UN Archives, S-1021-0143-35, 14 February 1945, Herbert Lehman address before the Washington Chapter.
- [7] UN Archives, S-1021-0080-08, Dr Sainz de la Pena, History Report No.23 (Health Division), September 1947.
- [8] FO 371/51095, Joint Staff Mission, Washington to Allied Military Staff Special Operations, 2 July 1946. Arie Kochavi, ‘British Policy on non-repatriable Displaced Persons in Germany and Austria, 1945-1947’, *European History Quarterly*, Vol.21, No.3, July 1991, pp.365-382, here p.365.
- [9] Proudfoot, as above, pp.238/9. Kochavi, as above, p.367. Proudfoot, pp.238-9, Kochavi. *ibid*.
- [10] FO 371/57778, memorandum on ‘Refugees and Displaced Persons’, March 1947. FO 371/66667, memorandum on ‘Displaced Persons in Germany’, 21 April 1947.
- [11] FO 371/51098, Paul Mason (Head of the Refugee Department), Memorandum, 2 August 1945. John George Stoessinger, *The Refugee and the World Community* (Minneapolis, 1956), esp. p.60-65
- [12] For example, FO 371/51128, Lt.Gen. B.H. Robertson, Chief of Staff British Zone, to the Permanent Under-Secretary of State, COGA, 8 December 1945. FO 371/51128, Douglas MacKillop (head of the Refugee Department) to Gottlieb, 22 December 1945. FO 371/5770, ‘The problem of non-repatriable refugees’, 9 November 1945. FO 945/360, minutes of meeting, 27 June 1946.
- [13] FO 371/38956, Jan Masaryk, ‘Czechoslovakia Looks East and West’, 13 March 1944
- [14] Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My years in the State Department*, (New York, 1969 reissued 1987), p.201.
- [15] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, May 1947, vol. 3.