

# FORCED MIGRATION DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR: AN INTRODUCTION

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In this essay, there appear references to file numbers from the Foreign Office ("FO") and Colonial Office ("CO"), housed at the U.K. National Archives. To see these documents, go to the advanced search, enter the reference as it appears within the essay and toggle to "Manuscript Number" to narrow your search.

## INTRODUCTION

The extent, consequences and legacy of wartime persecution and flight are extensively reflected in **Refugees, Relief and Resettlement: Forced Migration and World War II**. This introductory essay examines the scale and scope of global population displacement during and immediately following the Second World War. It also considers the activities of the main institutions involved in the relief and resettlement of civilians.

## PEOPLE ON THE MOVE:

### BEFORE AND DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The global character of population displacement was already evident before the outbreak of the Second World War. The Sino-Japanese War resulted in a huge upsurge in the number of Chinese refugees from July 1937 onwards. At least 45 million Chinese people were internally displaced, moving from northern and eastern China to unoccupied parts of the country; other estimates put the total at 100 million, a quarter of the entire population. The British government, fearful of the repercussions for the colony of Hong Kong, drew up plans for a large refugee camp in south China to accommodate the anticipated numbers of Chinese refugee women and children, and its location in an area where it would not be subject to Japanese bombardment (CO 129/570/3). Arrangements were also

made for destitute British refugees who reached Hong Kong from mainland China in 1937 and 1938. Other refugees included foreign nationals, mainly Russians from Canton and Hankow, who had settled there to escape revolution and civil war in Russia between 1917 and 1921 and who now fled for a second time (CO 129/570/1). British government files reveal concerns about controlling the numbers entering Hong Kong via different routes and the strain on the local Refugee Committee.

In Europe, the consequences of defeat for Spanish Republicans at the hands of Franco's troops reverberated in the corridors of power. By 1939 some 300,000 Spanish refugees crossed into France, and the adult men were interned in makeshift camps. Thousands more found safety in Mexico. Stalin agreed to admit 5,000 child refugees to the Soviet Union. British efforts, mainly non-official, to admit child refugees also appear in the files (FO 371/49599). The work of civil servants emerges with much less credit where adults were concerned (FO 371/24519).

As Nazi persecution intensified, the emigration of Jews from Germany also gathered momentum, although international efforts were feeble in relation to the scale of their need. As a result, millions found themselves trapped in Central and Eastern Europe. President Franklin Roosevelt convened an international conference at Evian in July 1938 in an attempt to get countries to accept a greater share of Jewish refugees (there was some desultory discussion in the United Kingdom about settling some in Tanganyika, per FO 371/22537, and the prospects for resettlement in the Dominican Republic, as in FO 371/66738), but the conference was widely regarded as a fiasco. The Evian

Conference led to the formation of an Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR), but the committee made little headway in the face of Nazi unwillingness to engage and widespread intransigence on the part of the international community to relax barriers to entry. During the war, the IGCR's hands remained largely tied, although its expertise proved valuable later on as new organisations appeared on the scene.

From time to time the plight of individual refugees can be heard in the official record. The World Jewish Relief Papers include an appeal by Viennese-born Stefan Zweig, the namesake of the famous writer, who wrote to British businessman Sigmund Gestetner in May 1939 from an address in Milan, asking for help in getting to England. Zweig travelled to Italy in the hope of joining friends in Peru, but he could not find the money to pay for the journey. Gestetner replied a few days later that he was unable to help. Although the record ends here, the files held by the International Tracing Service (created in 1948 by the International Refugee Organisation) tell us that Zweig survived the war and returned to Austria. Gestetner did however use his connections to help Hungarian Jews to escape from Hungary (see World Jewish Relief papers).

The files also illuminate private initiatives to rescue and support refugees. Voluntary organisations in the United Kingdom rescued hundreds of Basque children under the auspices of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief. Grassroots organisations, such as the Worthing Refugee Committee, under the active leadership of Dorothy Thornycroft, who had been active on behalf of Basque refugee children in 1937, worked

with Central Council for Jewish Refugees to support interned Jewish refugees.

A group based in Nice, 'Magna Charta', provided papers to Jewish refugees stripped of their nationality (FO 371/24075). A determined young British economist, Doreen Warriner, rescued hundreds of Sudeten German anti-Nazi refugees and Jewish families from Prague on the eve of Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia (FO 371/24082 and FO 371/24083). On the other hand, efforts to find places in British colonies for German-trained refugee nurses met with a frosty official response (CO 850/145/20).

There were also proposals for the organised resettlement of Jews from Eastern Central Europe, such as that from Polish businessman Michał Glazer in May 1938, who offered to finance Jewish emigration from Poland. The goal was to relieve the Polish government of the 'burden of excess population', in what amounted to a blaming of the Jews for their persecution because of their ostensible 'preponderance' in the economic life of Poland and Germany (FO 371/24075).

With the outbreak of war in Europe, organised evacuation and resettlement compounded the problems created by the exodus of civilian refugees. The German invasion of France caused five million civilians to flee their homes. Others were rounded up and deported to Germany as forced labourers. Far greater numbers of civilians were seized and deported from occupied Poland and the western parts of the Soviet Union. By January 1944 the Nazi war economy exploited some 6.6 million civilians (as well as two million working prisoners of war). Foreign refugees on

French soil suffered greatly, with the Vichy regime expelling around 30,000 Spanish civil war refugees to North Africa, where they were interned and put to work on construction projects.

The files also illuminate other little-known episodes in the history of refugees during Second World War. These include the evacuation, with the help of the Red Cross, of several thousand Greek children to India in the winter of 1941 via Tripoli, Cairo, Aleppo and Baghdad to save them from imminent starvation (IOR/L/PJ/8/435; FO 371/32637; FO 371/32637). In 1942 some 20,000 Greek refugees were transported to the Middle East in 1942; 2,700 were sent to the Belgian Congo and 1,000 to Ethiopia. Plans to send others to Mauritius went unrealised (FO 371/32645; FO 371/32647; FO 371/32653).

The Soviet Union simultaneously perpetrated mass population displacement and rescued refugees. The Stalinist regime deported millions of civilians—ethnic Germans, Poles, Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingushetians and others—to Siberia and Central Asia during the ‘Great Patriotic War’—. The files in this database, however, have plenty to offer on the fate of Jews and Poles following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (August 1939) and the Nazi invasion (Operation Barbarossa) in June 1941. Around a quarter of a million of Jews managed to escape in 1939 from Nazi-occupied Poland to territory under Soviet control. In 1941, the Nazi invasion of Poland, Belarus and the Baltic States trapped many of them, but as many as one million Jews may have been saved by their evacuation into the Soviet interior in 1941-42. In due course most of them—along with surviving Jews from Romania—made their way to Palestine.

Likewise, hundreds of thousands of Poles—soldiers and civilians alike—were either deported or escaped to Soviet Central Asia or to Siberia (see FO 371/42796 for an enquiry by a British-based charity about the welfare of Polish children in Siberia). With the formation of the Anders Army in July 1941, Stalin agreed to their evacuation through Persia and India, in order to join the Western Allied war effort. The files shed important light on the life of these soldiers and their dependants in Tanganyika (Tanzania), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Kenya and other destinations (see FO 371/32653; IOR/L/PJ/8/417).

Collection materials also shed light on the displacement of peoples in South Asia, with records on the experiences of Indian refugees who fled Burma and the involvement of Col J.S. Vorley, an official in the Indian Forest Service, in arranging for their evacuation. Vorley contributed to their relief during and beyond 1945, drawing up a plan for holding centres ‘to include evacuees, expelled persons, Axis organised workers, expatriates, etc.’, with the aim of ‘procuring indigenous labour for the Army’ (FO 371/51097).

Not all cases concern refugees. The files point to individuals who were interned, as happened to Hungarian-born Holusa Bartolomeo who moved to Ethiopia in 1932. He thrived under the Italian conquest until he and his family were detained by the British army in July 1942 following its successful occupation of the country. They were sent to Kenya and interned in Camp Nyeri until the end of the war. In 1946 he complained about his treatment not only at the hands of the British but at the refusal of the Ethiopian authorities to allow him to return. Given the option of

being returned to Hungary, he decided to move to the French island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean.

## PLANNING RELIEF AND RESETTLEMENT

The origins of relief and resettlement efforts can be traced back to discussions in London and Washington on the supply of basic commodities, including supplies needed by refugees. U.S. President Roosevelt had in November 1942 already created an Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations (OFRRRO). In May 1943 a United Nations conference took place at Hot Springs, Virginia, to discuss post-war food demand, supply and distribution, as a result of which 44 participating states agreed to establish a comprehensive organisation on relief and rehabilitation, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), 'to put back into running order those segments of a nation's economy which were necessary to carry out the relief programme, and to give each country and its people some of the tools to begin to help themselves'. It came into being in November under the direction of former Governor of New York, Herbert H. Lehman. Several UNRRA sub-committees oversaw health and medical care, assistance to displaced persons, and relations with voluntary relief agencies.

A landmark publication was issued by the National Planning Association (1944), *Europe's Uprooted People: the Relocation of Displaced Population* (FO 371/42836). After considering the scope for repatriation, absorption and resettlement, it concluded that these solutions 'are not intended to disguise the fact that post-war political and psychological conditions will necessitate, even though some suffering may be involved, certain exchanges and transfers of population and the

migration of many individuals from countries of origin to countries willing to accept them'. This became Allied policy after the war.

Refugee relief work began in earnest in May 1944. In Europe, under an agreement signed between General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Herbert Lehman, UNRRA was in effect subordinated to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), until national governments could assume responsibility for managing displaced persons and refugees. UNRRA created a number of teams, each assigned to an assembly centre that focused on the orderly repatriation of DPs.

Herbert Lehman reckoned on having to assist 20 million displaced persons ('suffering and uprooted people') return to their homes. Estimates of the scale of displacement derived initially from the Inter-Allied Committee on Post-War Requirements. Known more informally as the Leith-Ross Committee (named after Churchill's chief economic adviser, Sir Frederick Leith-Ross), this committee was charged with estimating the supply and demand for basic commodities. This committee produced a 'Statistical Statement on the Problem of Displaced Persons' in spring 1943, on the basis of information supplied by governments-in-exile and the Royal Institute of International Affairs. The committee estimated a figure of around 12.5 million refugees, but this number did not take into account of the movement of Soviet citizens heading east during the war, which the Russian demographer Eugene Kulischer estimated at ten million, giving a total of around 22.5 million refugees for Europe alone.



Beyond Europe, UNRRA absorbed the Middle East Relief and Refugee Administration (MERRA), which the British government had established in June 1942 to assist Greek, Yugoslav and Albanian refugees. UNRRA took over the administration of six large refugee camps in Egypt, Palestine and Syria, which housed more than 37,000 refugees by the end of 1944.

UNRRA also had a China Office with its own Displaced Persons Division, which by 1947 focused on the return of overseas Chinese to their homes in Burma, Malaya, British North Borneo and Sarawak (FO 371/66731). In addition to millions of internally displaced persons in China, UNRRA oversaw relief efforts for some 15,000 Jewish refugees (German and Austrian in origin) in the Far East, according to Fred Hoehler's report to the Tenth Session of the UNRRA Committee for the Far East on 13 December 1945 (FO 371/51109). The numbers of refugees in the Far East grew with the victory of the Chinese Communist Party and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, as Chinese refugees fled to Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Jewish refugees represented the 'surviving remnant' (in Hebrew Sh'erit ha-Pletah). Lucy Masterman, a leading figure in Liberal Party circles and a member of Cambridge Refugee Committee, even wrote to Winston Churchill in October 1944, proposing that Jewish refugees in the UK be granted naturalisation, unless they wish to repatriate (FO 371/42894). The Home Office rejected any blanket proposal and indicated that each case would need to be carefully considered on its merits. Officials meanwhile fobbed her off with a statement to the effect that the Allies insisted that Germany and Austria formally rescind all Nazi legislation relating to discrimination towards Jews.

Agreements between Poland and the USSR led to the repatriation of around 175,000 Jews to Poland after the war, mainly in 1946. The files disclose endless debates in 1945 and 1946 about 'infiltration' and 'illegal Immigrants', terms that characterised the return migration to the British and American Zones occupied Germany of Jews who had been repatriated to Poland (FO 1006/552). Because many of them entertained hopes of leaving Europe for good, the British authorities took the view that this threatened to undermine the limits it imposed on immigration to Palestine. In January 1946, Lt.-General Sir Frederick Morgan, who headed UNRRA operations in Germany, spoke of a Zionist 'plan'. In turn he'd be accused of denying proper care to Holocaust survivors. By the summer of 1947 around 250,000 Jews were registered as 'infiltrates', most of them in the American Zone. Most of them looked to resettle and rebuild their lives beyond continental Europe, either in Palestine/Israel or in the United States.

Administrative arrangements produced a bureaucratic vocabulary, including 'the reception and disposal' of 'obnoxious Germans', who lived abroad as merchants, missionaries and others, and who were scheduled for repatriation from neutral countries such as Spain, Portugal, Sweden and Argentina. The files contain extensive information about espionage, sabotage, propaganda and other pro-Nazi activities (FO 371/55343 through FO 371/55359; FO 1052/368). The use of the term 'disposal' also applied to the evacuation of Poles from the USSR to Persia and India in 1942 (IOR/L/PJ/8/413) and the planned repatriation or resettlement of Yugoslav refugees from Egypt at the war's end (FO 371/66675).

But not all was couched in bureaucratic terminology. We read of refugees as people who had lost their nationality and therefore suffered 'excommunication' by their governments, and who were 'deprived of every social basis of existence' (see Statement by the Netherlands Delegation on the Draft Definition of Refugees and Displaced Persons as adopted by the UN Economic and Social Council's Special Committee on Refugees and Displaced Persons that took place in London between 8 April and 1 June 1946 in FO 371/57674).

The files provide information on the administration of refugee camps. In the Middle East, a camp like El Shatt, which sat 100 miles east of Cairo, housed around 25,000 mainly Yugoslav refugees between 1944 and 1947, while Greek refugees stayed at nearby Moses Wells (FO 371/51202). Described in documentation as 'exceptionally well organised and run', El Shatt boasted a clinic, schools, a theatre, playgrounds, laundry facilities and other amenities. Croatian refugees even published a camp newspaper. Many of the refugees—British officials described them as 'dissidents'—refused to return to Yugoslavia after the war. The UK government expressed 'embarrassment' over the continuing presence of these refugees in Egypt. With IRO help, and the agreement of the Australian government, which described the adults as 'fine types' and the children as 'splendid' potential citizens, many of them eventually made their way to Australia (FO 371/66675).

Camps could also be the sites of ongoing vicious political rivalries, such as that between Yugoslav Chetniks and Tito's communist partisans. In January 1947 Chetnik refugees in a camp in Naples attacked a

repatriation officer who, visiting as part of an official Yugoslav delegation, later died of his injuries. As a result, the Italian government asked the British military authorities to clear the entire country of all Yugoslav nationals and to transfer them to Germany (US State Department Files, February 3 1947; FO 371/48918).

One especially large file deals with the repatriation of so-called 'Dissident Displaced Persons', mainly Poles from Ukraine, 'previously Polish and now Russian'. It lists their names, date and place of birth, where they lived on 1 September 1939, and where and to whom they wish to be released. In response to Soviet complaints about treatment of Soviet nationals by Polish forces under British command, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin advised the Soviet Ambassador in September 1945 that Ukrainians living outside the boundaries of the USSR in September 1939 'will be allowed to return to their homes if they wish to do so; but those who do not wish to be repatriated will not be sent home against their wishes, nor will they be placed under Soviet officers'. But this was accompanied by an official confirmation that under the terms of the Yalta Agreement, all Soviet citizens living on Soviet territory on 1 September 1939 must be repatriated, 'whether they wish to go or not' (FO 945/598; see also FO 1020/2467).

To assist with repatriation, displaced persons were organised into assembly centres. UNRRA's Director of Operations issued his Seventh Report on Displaced Persons Operations in July 1947, stating that repatriation was proceeding smoothly, helped by easing postal communications between DPs and relatives in their country of origin. He reported that Balts and Ukrainians were proving more recalcitrant, owing to

'the activities of anti-repatriation groups and individuals within and without the camps'. UNRRA had intervened to remove some individuals from their positions within the camps and had dissolved a Polish anti-repatriation committee (FO 371/66694). In all, around five million Soviet citizens were returned to the USSR between 1945 and 1947.

As the Cold War intensified, UNRRA gave way to the International Refugee Organisation (IRO). Its constitution, adopted by 18 member states in December 1946, spoke of assisting eligible refugees and displaced persons 'either to return to their countries of nationality or former habitual residence, or to find new homes elsewhere'. The IRO acknowledged that large numbers of DPs had no wish to return to their homeland and instead hoped to be resettled beyond Stalin's reach. The Soviet Union, which played no part in the IRO, berated it for protecting war criminals and defectors, in breach of the Yalta Agreement, rather than identifying them and returning them to the USSR to face justice. The U.S. State Department Records offer a contemporary analysis of the political opinions of various Russian and Ukrainian émigrés in Germany after the war (see May 25, 1949 File). Although Soviet Liaison Officers continued visiting camps to encourage recalcitrant DPs to return, sometimes carrying letters from relatives back home to offer reassurance that they would get a warm welcome, most DPs held firm (FO 1013/2097). The situation with respect to Poles who did not wish to be repatriated also received extensive discussion (FO 371/57780).

Files in the collection also serve as a rich source of information on the local employment and eventual resettlement of refugees and DPs, particularly when

read in conjunction with the online archives of the International Tracing Service at Bad Arolsen (see FO 371/66649; FO 371/66721; FO 1052/556). The IRO worked closely with nongovernmental organisations such as the Red Cross, the YMCA/YWCA, the American Friends Service Committee, the National Catholic Welfare Conference and the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Faced with a shortage of manpower for economic reconstruction, the British government scoured camps in Germany and Austria in 1946 and 1947 to recruit men and women to work in industry, agriculture and forestry, and as hospital orderlies. Initially referred to in the documentation as Operation Balt Cygnets and Operation Westward Ho (FO 1052/416; FO 1006/513; FO 371/57869), these refugee recruits were renamed European Volunteer Workers, a description applied to the more than 80,000 individuals who arrived in the United Kingdom between 1946 and 1951 after having passed rigorous 'inspections' and 'orientation' programmes. Nor was the U.K. alone as evidence by the efforts of the Belgian government, which similarly recruited DPs to work in coal mines (FO 371/66664).

Around 400,000 DPs travelled to the United States under the Displaced Persons Act of 25 June 1948. Others headed to Canada, Australia and South America, while many also spent years in camps ('self-settled') in Germany, Austria and Italy, having either failed to satisfy the 'health and sanitary control' measures imposed by prospective host governments or carrying a criminal conviction (often for very minor offences).

By the end of 1950, the IRO wound down as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



(UNHCR) took over its responsibilities. The UNHCR's mandate was governed by the 1951 Refugee Convention, which acknowledged as a general principle that refugees could claim protection if they were subject as individuals to a 'well-founded fear of persecution', on grounds of 'race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'. Notably the Convention applied only to refugees who had been displaced by events in Europe prior to 1 January 1951 and not to the millions of ethnic Germans expelled from Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary (FO 371/66753, for example, discusses the fate of Sudeten Germans). It enshrined as a principle that refugees could not be returned to the country that persecuted them. Having come into force on 22 April 1954, the Convention has remained the cornerstone of international refugee law ever since.

## CONCLUSION

In 1954 Louis W. Schneider, a prominent figure in the American Friends Service Committee, surveyed population displacement at mid-century:

There is a kind of grim and tragic monotony to this century's stereotype of large-scale relief and reconstruction and refugee aid: Spanish refugees, Jewish and political refugees, displaced persons, expellees, escapees, Pakistan, Palestine, Korea, South Vietnam. Where next do the vast governmental and the small voluntary agencies trek in the wake of these problems?

Schneider's graphic statement drew attention to the global scope of the post-1945 refugee crisis, partly resulting from the recent conflict and new civil wars, but also from organised population transfers and

exchanges in Europe and South Asia. The overall numbers of forced migrants may well have reached 175 million.

This digital project offers abundant information about British government policy, with a fair amount as well on U.S. efforts, and how decisions were reached about the management of refugees at a crucial moment in 20<sup>th</sup> century history. It also supplies details on the role of other important actors, namely inter-governmental organisations (UNRRA and the IRO) that no longer exist, and the voluntary agencies that had existed prior to the war or came in their own during the war, many of which continue to assist refugees today. For anyone interested in the history of mass population displacement and institutional responses, the material in **Refugees, Relief and Resettlement: Forced Migration and World War II** is an indispensable resource.

As an important postscript, the primary sources in this database are best understood in consultation with the work of contemporary scholars, in particular Joseph B. Schechtman, *European Population Transfers 1939-1945*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946; Malcolm J. Proudfoot, *European Refugees: a Study of Forced Population Movements*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1957; and Louise Holborn, *The International Refugee Organization: a Specialized Agency of the United Nations, its History and Work, 1946-1952*, London: Oxford University Press, 1956.

More recent scholarship of note includes Ben Shephard, *The Long Road Home: the Aftermath of the Second World War*, Bodley Head, 2010; G. Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Post-War Order*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012; Jessica Reinisch and Elizabeth White, eds, *The Disentanglement of Populations: Migration, Expulsion and Displacement in Postwar Europe, 1944-49*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; Marta Dyczok, *The Grand Alliance and Ukrainian Refugees*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000; Diana Lary, *The Chinese People at War: Human Suffering and Social Transformation, 1937-1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

## CITATION

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