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EUROPE'S HOMELESS MILLIONS

by FRED K. HOEHLER

FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION

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IT IS NOT TOO LATE FOR ACTION

By James G. McDonald

Former High Commissioner for Refugees, League of Nations

It is high time that there should be frank speaking about the failure of governments to deal worthily with the problem of the millions of innocent men, women, and children displaced by the policies of the Nazis and by the war. Against the dark background of this indescribable tragedy, we should not hesitate to underline the sorry contrast between the noble sentiment so generously expressed by statesmen and the grossly inadequate actions of most governments. With a few notable exceptions, their actions have been characterized by hesitancy, procrastination, half-heartedness or negativism—and this precisely at a time when the situation has demanded forthright, wholehearted, and generous actions.

Candor requires that we admit that governments, when dealing with refugees, have almost invariably taken the short view of national self-interest and have ignored or played down the interests of mankind. Illustrative of this calamitous blindness was the failure of the leading governments to take any action to check Nazi persecution during the first years of Hitler's regime, when

his program, motivated by insensate hatred of Jews and also of Catholics and Protestants who refused to bend their consciences to the dictates of the State, could have been checked easily and without bloodshed.

It is not necessary to attribute motives to statesmen or to governments; or to undertake to say why they acted and continue to act so timidly or not at all. The record tells its own bitter story and underlines its own timely and imperative moral.

The work of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and of the Inter-Governmental Committee has been made incomparably more difficult by this attitude of statesmen and governments. Unless now, thus belatedly, there is a radical change in these official attitudes, the directors of UNRRA and the IGC will have to continue the struggle against nearly insuperable obstacles.

EUROPE'S HOMELESS MILLIONS

By Fred K. Hoehler

Director, Division on Displaced Persons, UNRRA

1. The Beginning and the End

At the beginning and the end and throughout the reign of Nazism there were people without homes. There were people fleeing along highways, people crossing frontiers by night. There were women and children, old men and young men who fled to the mountains. They were the millions whose fate symbolized, in terms of human experience, the full tragedy of World War II, its origin and its aftermath.

The fate that the doomed men around Hitler inflicted upon their victims finally came to the German people, who for years after the war will remain without homes because the leaders they chose had disregarded human life. Who were their victims? Who are the millions of homeless Europeans of yesterday and today? They were slave laborers, men and women deported because of their race or religion, prisoners of war forced to work under the Nazis, those uprooted by bombings, those made homeless by frontier changes, and some who moved voluntarily from their homes. Their number was a few hundred thousand when it began. And when it all ended no one had counted them all, no

one knew the fate of every one of them. Only the conscience of the world dimly knew about the sea of tears and the sea of blood and of those who had died by the wayside and those who became nameless orphans and those whose minds were shattered somewhere along the road.

During the thirteen years from 1933 to 1946 the roads of migration crisscrossed the European continent. It began as soon as the Nazis came to power, when more than half of Germany's 650,000 Jews fled a religious-racial persecution. The pattern widened as Poland was invaded and the Balkans fell under Nazi and Fascist Italian control, as collaborators in Nazi-occupied Scandinavian and Western European countries persecuted minorities and began to lure or deport laborers to Germany.

When the Allies liberated Europe, they found that millions had been scattered about the European continent as a crazed giant would scatter the seeds of future unrest. Czechoslovaks had been sent to Norway, Norwegians to Germany, Netherlanders to the Ukraine, Yugoslavs to Czechoslovakia, Greeks to France, Frenchmen to Poland, Belgians to the Rhineland, Italians to France. Thus millions had been taken from their homes and other millions had come to the ruins of these homes. Nearly two and one-half million citizens of the Soviet Union had been deported, as laborers or prisoners, to almost every part of the European continent. Satellite nationals—Hungarians, Italians, Rumanians, as well as Finns and Spaniards—had been imported into Germany to stop the widening gaps in the Nazi war machine.

"DISPLACED PERSONS"

As the Allies rolled toward Berlin, eastward and westward, tens of thousands, and then hundreds of thousands, and then millions of these homeless who became known technically as "displaced persons" were liberated. When the hollow Nazi empire finally

collapsed, chaos spread. While Germans fled before the onrushing Allied armies, displaced Allied nationals streamed in the opposite direction towards their homelands. With the aid of Allied military authorities and international organizations, the United Nations managed to dam and regulate this flood. A gigantic task had to be solved.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, then Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, said in Washington on June 18, 1945, that this problem had been "terrible," and that it had been extremely difficult "to get the organization set up to take those people out."

Left in the wake of the war's devastation were some sixty million men, women, and children who upon liberation from Axis hands were stranded far from their homes—sixty million weary, sick, starving and lonely people, many of them crippled physically and mentally as a result of cruelties inflicted upon them by the enemy. On V-E Day, an estimated twenty million of them were homeless in widely scattered European cities and towns to which they had been taken by the Nazis, or in friendly countries to which they fled for their lives.

"Displaced" signifies far more than mere geographical dislocation. These individuals were displaced not only physically, but socially and economically as well, their problems more serious and varied than those of any large group of migrants in history. The task of helping them back to physical and mental health—and to some semblance of economic security after years of suffering and insecurity—was one of the greatest responsibilities confronting the United Nations when peace came at last.

THE LONG ROAD BACK

These refugees from Axis tyranny, however, unlike many refugee peoples of history—such as the Children of Israel, the Huguenots,

the early American settlers—were not able to flee in closely-knit bands, fired by the spirit of the crusade. If they escaped prisons or slave labor, they were forced to steal away from their oppressors by way of the underground, or on false passports, or by any other devious means at hand. Families were torn apart—familiar ties completely broken—and the new life became a matter of lonely, individual survival.

The road back home for these displaced persons is not a short or easy one; it will probably be years before the last of them will have found their rightful places again in society. Bringing them back to normal existence is not just a simple matter of providing emergency medical care, food, clothing, and the trucks and railway cars to carry them to their countries of origin or to new locations. They pose problems of rehabilitation that go far deeper into human psychology and sociology.

The case of one parentless, homeless boy of eighteen, whose record is detailed in the vast files on these people now being repatriated, is an extreme example of the psychological factors alone which are involved. This boy, inmate of a concentration camp from the time he was fourteen, had witnessed every form of Nazi cruelty. Among other tasks, he was forced to tabulate persons killed in a gas chamber. Day after day, he watched as they were led to their deaths. He said he had counted one million men, women and children murdered in the single month of May 1944. He bears a tattooed prison number and many scars on his pitifully undernourished, underdeveloped body. Proper medical care may possibly return him to sound physical health. But engraved on his mind are the memories of a thousand horrors that will haunt him for years.

His adolescence having been spent under these conditions of barbaric brutality and degradation makes this boy's emotional hurdles very great. Added to these will be the problems of pro-

viding him suitable home environment and preparing him for a productive and self-dependent future.

Multiply one "displaced" individual's personal rehabilitation problem by millions—and some conception may then be gained of the magnitude of the task of helping back to normalcy this vast group of people—these more fortunate victims of the Nazis who have managed somehow to survive years of misery, hunger, overwork, abuse and, in countless cases, sadistic torture.

WHO ARE THEY?

Many persons have the mistaken conception of Europe's "displaced persons" as being for the most part Jews. As a matter of grim fact, out of a pre-war Jewish population of nearly seven million (exclusive of Russia's three to three and one-half million) there are only about one and one-quarter million European Jews alive today outside Russia.

Europe's estimated twelve million displaced persons come from seventeen different United Nations countries. The bulk of them are Russian, Polish, French, Czech, Yugoslav, Italian, Dutch, Belgian and Greek; there are smaller numbers of Danes, Norwegians, Luxembourgers and other miscellaneous nationalities. Some of this displacement occurred in orderly and organized movements such as those which were planned for industry and government offices. Much of it was haphazard, in a frantic effort to escape the enemy. The relocation of these people will result in a tremendous mass migration such as no continent has ever before experienced.

The government, the armies and UNRRA together can only serve to alleviate the intense suffering and tragedy which will result. Planning to this end has long been under way and the operations have just begun. Thousands of rest homes will have to be established. Reception areas must be prepared. Health and wel-

fare services must go along with the provision of food and shelter. The story of this great movement will be a saga in itself.

These displaced persons are in six distinct categories:

Refugees: German Jewish and political refugees who when Hitler came into power were driven across Europe, many of them to distant countries; and those civilians (particularly Jews) who fled from virtual death sentences when the Germans invaded their homelands.

Evacuees: Another major group, involved in organized flight from hostilities upon the actual or anticipated bombing of cities by the Germans and Japanese. Some of these people were commanded to leave by the Axis armies as they moved into conquered areas—as in the case of the large numbers of French on the Mediterranean coast, who were ordered to move northward, to find shelter, work, any means of existence, as best they could.

Prisoners of war: The millions of United Nations nationals and members of the armed forces who had been held in concentration camps in Germany and German-occupied territory and in Japanese prison camps in the Asiatic areas.

Political and racial prisoners: Those additional millions confined in concentration camps in Germany and Poland by the German government because of their anti-Nazi political activities or simply because they were Jews.

Slave laborers: The men, women and young people of the invaded European countries, brought into Germany and German-occupied territory to work in factories and on farms; and those millions of Chinese who were forced into labor for the Japanese.

"Intruders": Members of the Axis armed forces and Axis civilians remaining in United Nations countries when the war ended.

2. Lasting Dislocation

While people of the Allied countries still moved home on foot, by truck, by rail, by airplane and by any other means of transportation available, another flow began, greater than any other single migration caused by the Nazis. The men, women and children who moved westward along the highways now were Germans who were being expelled from Polish-controlled territory. They were joined by other Germans whom Czechoslovakia began to move out of the Sudeten region in the northern part of the country. Again, perhaps seven million, perhaps nine million, perhaps as many as twelve million homeless Europeans were on the move. And here was the beginning of a permanent dislocation, probably even more lasting in its effect on the future of the European continent than previous migratory movements that had also been caused, directly or indirectly, by Nazi Germany's mad dream of world domination.

Meanwhile, others who had been deported or had fled to Western Europe did not have homes to return to, or did not want to be repatriated to countries of origin where conditions had changed since their exit. Many of them were Poles. Others were Jews—only a remnant of Europe's pre-war Jewish population that had been decimated in Nazi gas chambers and extermination camps.

Many Eastern European nationals were wary of their future fate under the rule of new governments at home. At the same time the provisional Polish Government of National Unity appealed to Polish nationals all over the world to return to their homeland. There was a vast territory, mostly agricultural, to be settled, where Germans had previously lived. Many Jews, temporarily housed together with other displaced persons, in Allied-supervised relocation camps, did not want to return to Germany or to other European countries where the Nazi-injected virus of

anti-Semitism had not been completely eradicated. A great number of them looked towards Palestine as a possible country of permanent refuge. But Zionist aspirations towards a Jewish homeland in Palestine were countered by Arab nationalism which considered continued Jewish immigration into Palestine a threat to that country's Arab community.

Other homeless Europeans, nationals of nearly every country on the continent, desired a permanent refuge and the chance to begin a new life somewhere overseas.

NO MORE FRONTIERS

Where could they go? Which country would open its doors to them? The time of vast frontiers was passed. True, there were immense undeveloped territories on the continents of North and South America, of Africa and Australia. But fear of labor surplus and the influx of foreign elements representing ideological conflict caused most potential countries of immigration to close their doors, permitting hardly more than a mere trickle of newcomers to enter their territory.

Immediate relocation and repatriation activity, following Germany's surrender, had been carried on by the Allied armies. In the East, the Red Army supervised the return home of Allied nationals within its control zones. It cooperated in the westward movement of French, Dutch, Belgian and other Western European displaced persons, as well as in the return home of some two million Soviet nationals.

As Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force, was disbanded in the summer of 1945, civil affairs officers of the United States, British and French armed forces in the occupation zones of Western Germany continued repatriation work that had until that time been done by SHAEF's Combined Displaced Persons Executive. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation

ARRIVAL AT THE SHORES OF THE HOMELAND

Administration undertook a vast part of the care in repatriating displaced persons from Western Europe. But none of these military and civilian bodies could solve the great remaining problem: to find permanent homes for all those unable to return to their homelands—those men, women and children who in the technical language of Allied officials were "unrepatriable."

The task of considering this problem falls to the Inter-Governmental Committee on Refugees, set up by the free nations of the world at the French town of Evian in July 1938, when the Nazi persecution on racial, religious and political grounds had become the direct concern of the democratic nations. There was and is no easy solution for the fate of Europe's homeless millions. Neither the conference at Evian, nor the British-American Conference at Bermuda in the spring of 1943 offered an immediate solution. When the nations of Latin America met at Mexico City in the fall of 1943 for the Pan-American Demographic Congress, they discussed mutual problems of immigration and nationalization, but definitive decisions on the extent and character of immigration remained with each individual government.

CLOSED DOORS

No one can deny that there now is reluctance on the part of all countries that are traditionally immigrant territories, to open their doors to those who remain from the flood of Allied homeless millions. The world cannot ignore the fact that hundreds of thousands, the majority of whom have been the most immediate victims of Nazism, represent an accumulation of individual suffering, insecurity, frustration and despair which must eventually affect the realities of world reconstruction and a lasting peace.

Meanwhile—although, from an Allied point of view, a matter of secondary importance compared to the fate of Hitler's homeless victims—the continent of Europe faces the dislocation of the