Resettle, Repatriate or Remain: Soviet ‘Displaced Persons’ in Germany and Their Options in the Early Cold War

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The end of World War II left many problems that, within a couple of years, had acquired a Cold War colouration as the former wartime allies, Britain and the United States on the one side and the Soviet Union on the other, moved apart. Not least among them was the problem of so-called displaced persons (DPs)—men and women who found themselves outside their own countries as a result of becoming prisoners of war (POWs) to the Germans, being taken by the Germans to Germany as forced labour or simply departing with the retreating Germans from occupied regions at the end of the war. Eastern Europeans, including Soviet citizens, formed the majority of the millions displaced, and were the hardest to dispose of.¹

This was truly an international problem. International relief organisations were involved: first the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA), set up by the Allies during the war, and then from 1947 the International Refugee Organization (IRO), set up and financed largely by the Americans, which the Soviet Union declined to join. The great powers were also deeply involved in multiple ways. Britain, the United States and, on a smaller scale, France were running occupation regimes in Germany and Austria where the majority of DPs were housed in DP

camps managed by UNRRA and then IRO; and, in addition, the US was the major desired place of resettlement for DPs (but with a hesitant Congress and public opinion) while Britain was the country taking most DPs on contract employment schemes before IRO’s resettlement scheme got underway. The Soviet Union was running occupation regimes in Germany and Austria too, and, in addition, was pushing for the speedy repatriation of DPs of Soviet origin in Europe, who, at the end of the war, numbered about 5 million and were becoming deeply resentful of decreasing Allied cooperation. Another large contingent of DPs was Jewish, many of them wishing to go to Palestine, initially in the face of British objections but with US and Soviet support, so that the DP issue was part of the complex web of conflict and negotiation between the great powers that led to the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948.

Possible Outcomes for DPs in Germany after WWII

There were over 1 million DPs left in Germany, Austria and Italy when IRO took over. These were predominately Polish, Jewish and Baltic peoples, according to UNRRA’s figures, but there was also a substantial Soviet component.2 Viewed in retrospect, the three possible fates of the DPs were repatriation, resettlement and remaining in the countries they had landed in as DPs—Germany, Austria and Italy—after the DP camps were closed.

At the end of the war, repatriation seemed the obvious solution, starting with the soldiers who, by usual practice and Allied agreement at Yalta, would normally be repatriated. The majority of Germany’s POWs were from the Soviet Army, and with Allied cooperation the Soviet Union set about repatriating them with all possible speed. But there were complications. During the war, many Soviet POWs in German camps

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2 IRO figures show only 2 per cent Soviet DPs (see: Louise W. Holborn, *The International Refugee Organization* [London: Oxford University Press, 1956], 197), but this is undoubtedly a gross underestimate, since DPs from the Soviet Union, fearing forced repatriation, rarely identified themselves as such to the authorities. See: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *White Russians, Red Peril: A Cold War History of Migration to Australia* (Melbourne: University of Latrobe Press/Black Inc., 2021), 13–14, doi.org/10.4324/9781003179474. A Russian historian calculated that over 200,000 Soviet-origin DPs (excluding the Baltic states) were still in Europe as of 1 January 1952, even after mass resettlement by IRO. See: V. N. Zemskov, ‘Rozhdenie “vtoroi emigratsii”, 1944–1952’, *Sotsiologicheskie isledovaniia*, no. 4 (1991): 21.
had been recruited to the so-called Vlasov Army to fight the Soviets under German command, which made them collaborators at risk of Soviet punishment (and also, strictly speaking, ineligible for UNRRA protection). Many bitterly resisted repatriation. When the British at Lienz tried to force a large group of Cossacks (mainly Soviet citizens) to return in the custody of Soviet forces, there were suicides, distress and confusion on the part of the British troops involved, as well as questions in parliament. Other Soviet DPs, including Ostarbeiter (forced labourers taken to Germany during the war), were similarly disinclined to return, partly for economic reasons (Germany, even in ruins, was visibly richer than the Soviet Union) and partly because of wartime propaganda suggesting that anybody who consorted in any way with the Germans was at risk of being sent to Gulag when they returned.³

Resettlement on a mass scale was not an option for UNRRA, which defined its role vis-a-vis DPs as care and maintenance until they could be repatriated. So for the first two years after the end of the war, most of the DPs sat aimlessly in the DP camps, waiting to see what would happen. The breakthrough came in July 1947, when UNRRA was replaced by IRO, with a new policy of mass resettlement outside Europe. Australia, with a postwar labour shortage, was among the first to sign up; however, for several years, demand for resettlement places was far higher than supply. It was not until 1948 that the logjam was broken, first by the US passing the DP Act allowing selective immigration and second by the formation of the state of Israel and its opening (despite ongoing civil war, which made many Jewish DPs hesitant) to DP migration. Even then, all the recipient countries had preferences and priorities, generally for young, healthy manual workers. Unpopular groups like Jews could expect trouble getting selected, and it was almost impossible to find placement for the old, sick, disabled (and their families) and intellectuals.⁴

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³ When Soviet archives opened in the 1990s, it was found that the actual figures were much lower. Of 4.2 million civilians and prisoners of war repatriated to the Soviet Union as of 1 March 1946, just 6.5 per cent were handed over to the NKVD for punishment in Gulag and prison, while 58 per cent were sent straight home. The rest were drafted back into the army or into labour brigades. Nick Baron, ‘Remaking Soviet Society: The Filtration of Returnees from Nazi Germany, 1944–49’, in Warlands: Population Resettlement and State Reconstruction in the Soviet-East European Borderlands, 1945–1950, ed. Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron (Basingstoke, Hants: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 115, n.80, doi.org/10.1057/9780230246935_5.

As of 1947, remaining in place was a very dubious option, despite the wistful dream of some DPs of creating their own country (‘Dipistan’) in Europe. Germany, where the largest number of DPs were, was still divided into four occupation zones, with their respective governments mainly giving lip service to the notion of reunification but who were actually unwilling, given developing Cold War hostilities, of yielding anything to the other side. To be sure, the British and the US wanted a speedy departure to remove the burden of running the occupation regimes, but the Berlin crisis of 1948 showed the near impossibility of reaching a solution cooperatively, as well as the real danger of a new war, this time between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union. The solution formalised in 1949 was the creation of two Germanies, the Federal Republic of Germany, comprising the British, American and French occupation zones, and the Democratic Republic of Germany, consisting of the former Soviet zone. While the Federal Republic ended up doing well economically, thanks to the Marshall Plan and an effective currency reform, its ‘economic miracle’ was not foreseen, and nobody knew how well it would cope with hundreds of thousands of former DPs, many of them old and sick.

Contrasted Positions on Soviet DPs

The Soviets regarded all DPs who were former Soviet citizens as ‘ours’, subject to repatriation regardless of nationality, religion, sex, age, state of health, criminal record or political attitudes, and also regardless of individual wishes. They cited the Yalta agreement, which did indeed endorse the speedy return of all DPs to their home countries and appeared to condone the use of force if necessary. To suggestions that individual wishes should be taken into account, they invoked the notion both of ownership and entitlement (on the basis of having taken the brunt of war casualties and damage). When the IRO adopted a new policy of resettling the DPs outside Europe in 1947, the Soviet Union regarded this as ‘stealing’ and accused them of wanting to gain cheap labour for the colonies. Soviet spokesman Andrei Vyshinsky told the UN General Assembly on 12 February 1946: ‘We refuse to accept this tolerance [of non-return by DPs]. We paid a high price for it, with too much blood and too many lives.’

The issue of repatriation was greatly complicated by the fact that the Soviet definition of ‘Soviet citizen’ included inhabitants of the regions of the Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia that, while historically part of the Russian Empire, had been part of Poland since the World War I settlement. These regions were incorporated into the Soviet Union after the Nazi–Soviet Pact of 1939, the relevant population having no say in the matter but automatically acquiring Soviet citizenship. These new involuntary Soviet citizens were over-represented in the Ostarbeiter DP group by virtue of having lived closer to the border and Germany, therefore, they were the first to be mined for Ostarbeiter. Ukrainian nationalism was strong among the West Ukrainians, and they were more likely to see the Soviet Union as an illegitimate occupying power than as a homeland.

The Western Allies, having at first supported Soviet repatriation efforts, backed off after evident resistance. In light of Yalta, they could not openly oppose Soviet repatriation, but after the first months they did everything to drag their feet. Britain and the US refused to accept the Soviet contention that citizens of the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia), incorporated in 1939, were Soviet citizens liable for repatriation, and West Ukrainians and West Belorussians soon acquired the same protected status. The UK and US occupation regimes made it increasingly difficult for Soviet repatriation officers to visit DP camps, citing DP hostility and fears, and finally forced the Soviet repatriation missions to close.⁶

The issue of voluntary return became central in one of the first big human rights arguments in the UN, in which Eleanor Roosevelt, President Roosevelt’s widow and the US representative to the UN on human rights, opposed Vyshinsky with an argument on democratic principle:

> Are we so weak in the United Nations, are we as individual nations so weak, that we are going to forbid human beings to say what they think and to fear whatever their friends with their particular type of mind happen to believe in … It is their right to say [things] and it is the right of men and women in refugee camps to hear them and to make their own decision.⁷

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Here the US had the moral high ground, but on the issue of war criminals its stance was less elevated. In principle, the Western Allies, particularly the British, were in favour of discovery and punishment of war criminals, including collaborators and those who had fought under German command during the war, but in practice they almost invariably protected them. They would not accept the Soviets’ list of war criminals and were uneasy at Soviet war crimes trials, and, as the archival record reveals, did everything possible to weasel out of handing over individuals that they themselves regarded as collaborators. Some of the more egregious were helped by Western intelligence agencies to emigrate under assumed names in the IRO mass resettlement schemes. Soviet requests for their extradition for trial in the 1960s were ignored, and it was not until the 1980s that a new mood set in and the US, Britain and Australia all initiated prosecution—usually unsuccessfully, due to the difficulties of finding reliable witnesses—of a few war criminals who had entered their countries 30 years earlier as DPs.

DP Agency

The DPs were keen on describing themselves, especially in retrospect, as pawns of fate, deprived of all agency or ability to influence what happened to them. But this picture can be misleading, even though their collective disposition was a matter discussed and decided at great power level. There were many ways in which the DPs could and did take initiatives and made choices to influence outcomes. First and most egregiously was the self-identification offered to UNRRA and the occupation authorities at the end of the war: name, age, place of birth, prewar occupation, nationality/citizenship. The DPs did not usually arrive with documents, but if they did, they often destroyed them and acquired false documents (easy and cheap in Europe at the time). The authorities did not usually speak their language, so communication was through an interpreter. If a 45-year-old Russian lawyer who had been a Communist Party member and had a wife and children back in Siberia claimed to be an unmarried anti-communist 35-year-old Polish bricklayer or Serbian physician, the only person who could prove him wrong—if, in fact, his Polish or Serbian were elementary—was the DP interpreter, who was likely to be on his side rather than that of the authorities.

I have used documents of Michael Danos, a Latvian born in 1922, who was a DP from 1945, as illustrations in this paper. He was one of the most honest of DPs, but even he took out a bit of insurance: in addition to registering as a DP in Hannover in the British zone as a Latvian, he also registered in Frankfurt in a Jewish camp in the American zone with slightly different details as Jewish, probably with the aim of doubling his chances of getting back into university. Education (secondary, specialised, tertiary) were among the options available to DPs. (Michael, in fact, finished his engineering degree in Hannover and went on to complete a PhD in Heidelberg by the time of his departure to the US in 1951.) But this was not the only option available. Michael’s mother, Olga Danos, set up several small businesses as a DP with UNRRA help. Other DPs found work with UNRRA, IRO or the occupation forces, particularly the American forces. Apart from the good wages and conditions, this offered personal connections that were likely to be helpful when applying for resettlement (or, in the case of DP woman, finding a GI husband). Some adventurous young male DPs signed up with the French Foreign Legion to see the world, although in theory the legion was not supposed to recruit DPs.

Figure 1: Michael Danos’s DP card (c. 1945).
Source: Author’s private collection.

Figure 2: Latvian DP students in Hannover, late 1940s (Michael Danos at left).
Source: Author’s private collection.
Within the world of the DP camp, there was also a range of possibilities. The camps were largely self-governing, often by a strong nationalist/anti-communist DP elite, so that seeking office and a designated (paid) position in the administration and policing of the camp was an option, as was participation in the various aspects of camp life (schools, choirs, church, drama and sporting groups, Boy Scouts, and a range of émigré political organisations like NTS [Narodnyi trudovoi soiuz or National Labor Union], a conspiratorial Russian organisation operating internationally and dedicated to the overthrow of the Soviet Union). Participation in black market activities was also possible and often very profitable given the supply of UNRRA/IRO goods and the needs of the surrounding German population.

National selection committees, through which the DPs had to pass to be chosen for migration to a particular destination like Australia, posed other requirements, to which savvy DPs did their best to conform in their self-presentations. Age might be reduced if there was a cut-off age of 40 or 45; marriages might be suppressed if single men or women were preferred (or, alternatively, contracted with partners who better fit the particular committee’s nationality requirements). Latvian was a good nationality for selection; Jewish was a bad one. Intellectuals did well to forget their former professions and become manual workers or nurses for the benefit of selection committees.

Outcomes

From 1947, DPs had the choice to apply for emigration to one of the destinations available under IRO mass resettlement. Of course, the decision to apply to, say, Chile did not guarantee that Chile would take you; many DPs ended up rejected by their first choice and emigrating to a place that wasn’t even on their list (often Australia). But there was a decision involved in the first place, and there were even a limited number of strategies available that might help you get your wish. In the period before the establishment of the state of Israel and the regularisation of DP

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migration there, adventurous Jewish DPs might allow themselves to be recruited and smuggled out of Europe by underground Jewish organisers. All in all, over 1 million DPs of all nationalities chose resettlement, with the US, Australia, Israel and Canada taking the largest contingents. It is harder to put a number on the subgroup of Russian/Soviet DPs, since they were mainly sailing under false national colours, but a figure of 100,000 resettled Russian and Soviet DPs, including over 60,000 Soviet DPs (not counting Balts and Ukrainians), is probably close to the mark.

The number of voluntary repatriates to the Soviet Union in the years 1947–52 was smaller, about 30,000. This was a minority choice, since the fear of punishment and recognition of the West’s higher living standards were deterrents for all, and those from the newly incorporated territories had the additional reason of not regarding the Soviet Union as their homeland. For certain subgroups, however, the choice made sense—namely single mothers, criminals and people unlikely to meet the selection criteria for resettlement (i.e. TB or VD sufferers, the mentally ill, the aged and intellectuals). Even after resettlement, the Soviet Union continued its efforts to convince its citizens to return, sending two agents under diplomatic cover to Canberra to locate DPs who had migrated to Australia and persuade them to return. Their efforts were largely unsuccessful, but a trickle of resettled DPs did repatriate in the late 1940s and early 1950s from England, Latin America, Australia and elsewhere.

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12 Holborn, *International Refugee Organization*, Annex 43, 442, gives a total of 1,038,750 DPs of all nationalities resettled between 1 July 1947 and 31 December 1951, the largest number in the United States (328,851), followed by Australia (182,159), Israel (132,109) and Canada (123,479).

13 According to IRO figures (clearly underestimate, for the reasons discussed above), 41,000 Soviet citizens were resettled, plus 26,000 ‘stateless’ (or without Nansen passports from the League of Nations) persons, the majority of whom would have been Russian émigrés (or Soviet citizens passing as such), for a total of around 67,000. Of these, 24,838 went to the US, 9,424 to Canada and 8,840 to Australia, with smaller groups ending up in Brazil, Argentina and other Latin American countries. See: Holborn, *International Refugee Organization*, Annex 41, 437–40. But at a US Senate hearing in 1956, Alexandra Tolstoy of the Tolstoy Foundation, active in moving Russian DPs from Europe to the United States, estimated that an additional 15,000 former Soviet citizens had entered under other national identities. See: *Scope of Soviet Activity in the United States. Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, Eighty-Fourth Congress, Scope of Soviet Activity in the United States, April 27 and May 17, 1956, Part 21* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1956), 1327. This would bring the US number to almost 40,000 and, by extension, the total number of Russians/Soviets resettled after the war to over 100,000.


A hard core, upwards of 100,000 DPs, remained in Europe after the closing down of IRO and its camps in the early 1950s, many of them old and sick. IRO managed to place some of them in various European countries (e.g. TB sufferers to Switzerland), and the rest stayed in the new Federal Republic of Germany, being reclassified from ‘displaced persons’ to ‘homeless foreigners’ (heimatlose Ausländer).\textsuperscript{16}

\section*{Conclusion}

The disposition of DPs in Europe after WWII became an early Cold War battle in which the Soviets were badly defeated. It was not just that they lost almost half a million people, on top of millions of wartime civilian and military casualties. That loss also created a strongly anti-Soviet and anti-communist ‘second wave’ emigration that, as the Soviets had feared, could be used against them by the West. In addition, there was huge reputational damage. Since the Soviets were never willing to admit that

there might be any difference between prewar Soviet citizens, for whom the Soviet Union really was the 'homeland', and 1939 acquisitions (perhaps three-quarters of the whole Soviet DP contingent), for whom the opposite was true, the impression was left in the West that no Soviet citizen who got out would ever want to go back. This reputational damage would be adroitly exploited in later phases of the Cold War, when all defectors from the Eastern bloc tended to get maximum publicity emphasising the 'I chose freedom' motif.

The Soviets were caught in a similar cleft stick with regard to punishment of those repatriated: according to DP rumour and Allied belief in Europe in the late 1940s, all repatriates were likely to be sent to Gulag, although, as we have seen, the numbers actually sent there were reasonably small, with some categories (e.g. women Ostarbeiter) extremely unlikely to meet such a fate. But since the Soviets habitually denied the existence of a Gulag or that any repatriates were sent there, they were unable—even if the thought had occurred to them—to correct this misapprehension.

The fact that the issue was badly mishandled by the Soviets should not obscure the fact that it was an enormous achievement for the West, unmatched in any subsequent international refugee crisis. For six to seven years, DPs were comfortably housed, comparatively well fed and clothed, and even educated at the expense of the international organisations and the occupying powers (with the US paying almost all the bill, despite continual complaints from Congress). The resettlement program was spectacularly well executed by IRO, supported by various voluntary organisations like the World Council of Churches, in a period of under five years. The new migrants of course encountered their share of difficulties, but there were no real disasters, certainly no bloodshed, no starvation, no mass homelessness. Later refugees, likely to be stuck for decades in miserably ill-equipped camps with no employment or prospect of escape, would think themselves lucky to do as well—and so, on the whole, did the resettled DPs.