

**“A Strange Half-World”:
The Lives of Soviet Nationals in Europe’s Displaced Persons Camps, 1945-1948**

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By the end of the Second World War, there were 8 million dislocated people within the borders of Germany alone.¹ These people were categorized as displaced persons (DPs), defined as civilians outside their national borders. In practice, though, the definition of these people was not so clean-cut and the path to becoming a DP was varied. They included civilians who had fled or were evacuated from areas of active combat, or who were deported to Germany for forced labour, as well as collaborators, resisters, and partisans of various shades fleeing advancing liberating armies, and prisoners of war engaged in forced or voluntary economic or military service for the Reich. DPs were also defined by their nationality to determine the assistance they would receive—those from Allied countries were termed United Nations DPs and were given the highest priority for relief, while displaced ethnic Germans were ineligible for Allied assistance.² The majority of DPs in Germany and other European nations, notably Austria, Italy, France, and Yugoslavia, originated from the Soviet Union or territories newly annexed to the Soviet Union, and therefore came under the care of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), which was a subordinate of the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) and later Allied military occupation authorities. The Allies had two basic goals with regards to the DPs: first, to provide for their basic material needs, and second, to repatriate them as quickly as possible according to the Yalta Agreement. Repatriation to the Soviet Union initially proceeded quickly, on both voluntary and forced bases: three million people were repatriated by September 1945, and a further one million by March 1946.³ But for others, the stay in Europe's DP camps would be much longer: around a million DPs refused to be

¹ Anna Marta Holian, *Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism: Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011), 38.

² Holian, 42-44.

³ Holian, 38; and Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Motherland Calls: "Soft" Repatriation of Soviet Citizens from Europe, 1945-1953," *Journal of Modern History* 90, no. 2 (June 2018), 323.

repatriated, and the Western Allies became increasingly reluctant to use force to do so. About 450,000 of these people were Soviet nationals.⁴ In 1947, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) replaced UNRRA with a new mandate for resettlement as opposed to repatriation.

The repatriation of Soviet DPs first received significant scholarly attention in the 1970s. Early studies of this issue, characterized by Nicholas Bethell's *The Last Secret* and Nikolai Tolstoy's *The Secret Betrayal*, are unsurprising staunchly anti-Soviet and focused on British and American policy. They endeavoured to expose the Western Allies' complicity in condemning millions of people to death and imprisonment at the hands of the secret police upon their return to the Soviet Union.⁵ In the next two decades, some authors, such as Mark Elliott, would continue this polemic, while others like Mark Wyman paid more attention to the DPs themselves, remaining critical of forced repatriation with a more balanced approach.⁶ This is in part due to the opening of archives following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, which allowed for the most extreme contentions to be rectified: for example, only 7% of Soviet repatriates were turned over to the NKVD, 33% were drafted into military or labour service, and 60% were allowed to return to their homes, albeit in marginalized societal positions, as opposed to earlier estimates that as much as 70% of the repatriates were executed or imprisoned in labour camps.⁷ The opening of archives has also allowed scholars to study other aspects of repatriation. Sheila Fitzpatrick, for example, has questioned why the Soviet Union insisted on mandatory, universal repatriation, while Anna Marta Holian has considered the national and political activities of the

⁴ Fitzpatrick, 323-324.

⁵ Nicholas William Bethell, *The Last Secret: Forcible Repatriation to Russia 1944-7* (London: A Deutsch, 1974); and Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Secret Betrayal* (New York: Scribner, 1977). Published in Britain as *Victims of Yalta* in 1977.

⁶ Mark R. Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta: Soviet Refugees and America's Role in their Repatriation* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1982); and Mark Wyman, *DPs: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-1951* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁷ Fitzpatrick, 343-346.

DPs.⁸ However, the experience of the DP camps—where millions of DPs and Allied personnel spent months to years of their lives—is rarely the focus in this body of literature. Though aspects of life in the DP camps has been studied (for example, political activity by Holian), a broader, more complete picture of this life is lacking.

This paper will attempt to provide a more comprehensive picture of life in Europe's DP camps, acknowledging the diversity of experience from the point of view of both DPs and UNRRA personnel. It will focus on camps housing Soviet DPs who resisted repatriation, an ethnically diverse group including Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians. For these people, the camps were not simply a waystation on their journey home. They were a refuge—if at times an undesirable one—from Soviet repression, and a potential springboard to a better life. Their experiences of the camps, then, were fundamentally different from other DPs who did desire repatriation. In order to examine this experience, I will consider three aspects of daily life in DP camps: coverage of basic needs, community building, and interaction with the world outside the camps. Coverage of basic needs will consider the efforts of UNRRA personnel to provide DPs with adequate shelter, food, water, basic supplies, and medical care, as well as the DPs' reception of these services. Community building will examine social, cultural, and political activity in the DP camps, through UNRRA initiatives, aimed to “socially” rehabilitate DPs, and through DP initiatives, aimed both at establishing some degree of normalcy of life and advancing political agendas. Interaction with the outside world will consider interaction between DPs and local populations and repatriation and emigration officials. In order to investigate these aspects of daily life, I will utilize published memoirs and letters of both DPs of varied backgrounds and UNRRA personnel, contemporary UNRRA

⁸ See Fitzpatrick and Holian.

publications, and relevant secondary literature. If we are to achieve a more than superficial understanding of the phenomenon of displaced persons and their futures in post-World War II Europe, an exploration of the daily life and experiences of Soviet DPs is an essential companion to examinations of Allied policy.

Basic Needs

UNRRA's first objective with regards to the DP problem was to provide relief. Lieutenant General Frederick E. Morgan, UNRRA's Director of Services for Displaced Persons in Germany, stated upon his appointment in September 1945 that "one of our basic aims must...be the restoration to the individual of his [or her] right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The first condition of these rights must be the provision of food, clothing, shelter, [and] medical care."⁹ The provision of each of these basic necessities was challenged by extreme shortages. Allied bombing campaigns had resulted in a severe housing shortage in Germany; virtually any available space had to be utilized to house the massive DP population. There were three main types of DP housing: casern camps, barracks camps, and dwelling-house camps.¹⁰ The casern camps were former German and Italian military centres. For example, Wildflecken DP Camp in Bavaria, temporary home to 20,000 Polish DPs described in the memoir of its deputy director Kathryn Hulme, had been a training centre for elite ski-troops of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS.¹¹ Barracks camps included former forced-labour and concentration camps, as well as barracks constructed specifically for DPs after 1945. Dwelling-house camps consisted of sections of cities or whole villages, which were sometimes requisitioned from German civilians. In October 1945, for example, an entire housing development in Frankfurt named for

⁹ "General Morgan Comments on UNRRA's Tasks," *UNRRA Monthly Review* 1, no. 14 (October 1945), 20.

¹⁰ Wyman, 43-44.

¹¹ Kathryn Hulme, *The Wild Place* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1953), 6.

Herman Goering was requisitioned to house 3000 DPs.¹² This illustrates how Allied occupation policy initially favoured DPs over German civilians. Altogether, more than 900 camps were established for DPs in the western occupation zones of Germany alone.¹³

One issue of the *UNRRA Monthly Review* describes the “reception chain” that greeted DPs upon their entrance to the camps. First, they were registered by nationality, then medically inspected and deloused. They then received their first meal, as well as a few basic items: soap, blankets, and feeding utensils.¹⁴ Medical inspections were often negative experiences; as illustrated in Wyman’s study, many DPs recalled the delousing process, in which they were sprayed with DDT powder, as being particularly traumatic.¹⁵ Though medical care was generally a success, especially in preventing the outbreak of contagious diseases, shortages adversely affected the quality of care. At Wildflecken, medical staff ordered 2000 rubber glove fingers to conduct mandatory VD examinations—and received only six. They still conducted examinations on 5000 women.¹⁶ Clothing shortages were dealt with much more satisfactorily, with the arrival of tons of donated clothing from North America just before the winter of 1945.¹⁷ After years of privation, though, everyone’s chief concern was food. Modris Eksteins, who fled Latvia with his family ahead of the Red Army’s advance in 1945, remembers little of Lübeck DP Camp in Schleswig-Holstein, having lived there from the ages of just two to five. He has, however, written about his family’s experiences based on his father’s diaries and his mother’s testimony. Eksteins found little in his father’s 1944-1945 diary to indicate that he was in fact a man of

¹² “‘Goering’ Housing Development for DP’s Use,” *UNRRA Monthly Review* 1, no. 15 (November 1945), 5.

¹³ Modris Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak: A Story of Eastern Europe, World War II, and the Heart of Our Century* (Toronto: Key Porter Books Limited, 1999), 155.

¹⁴ “UNRRA and Displaced Persons,” *UNRRA Monthly Review* 1, no. 11 (July 1945), 2.

¹⁵ Wyman, 50.

¹⁶ Hulme, 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

education and reflection, who had studied in the United States and Britain. Rather, the entries revolve around food: “[t]he acquisitions of an apple was celebrated; the theft...of a bit of bacon...was lamented at great length.”¹⁸ The preoccupation with food continued throughout his 1946 diary. The quality of rations was often sub-par and a matter of discontent amongst many DPs. The frequently served split-pea soup was commonly referred to by Latvian DPs as “green horror,” for example.¹⁹ The primacy of food concerns could also be seen at Wildflecken, where DPs engaged in a large demonstration when they found out that Red Cross food parcels, containing such luxuries as chocolate, cheddar cheese, Nescafé, corned beef, and Spam, were to be broken down and stored rather distributed whole to the DPs. The protest ended only when Hulme, in a fit of anger at the DPs’ lack of understanding, threatened jail time at Brückenau to anyone who interfered with the parcels. On this episode Hulme said in her memoir that the “DP’s [*sic*] prompt obedience to anger and threats seemed almost the worst discovery I had yet made about them.”²⁰

Community Building

In January 1946, reviewing DP operations of 1945, the *UNRRA Monthly Review* declared that the relief phase of UNRRA’s operation was over, and the organization would now undertake the rehabilitation of DPs as its major objective.²¹ This statement reflected the concern of the Allied Occupation Armies and UNRRA that the DPs had been so traumatized by their wartime experience that they may have lost their basic social habits and been unable to reintegrate successfully into society.²² Efforts to re-civilize or socially rehabilitate DPs were therefore seen

¹⁸ Eksteins, 197.

¹⁹ Wyman, 54.

²⁰ Hulme, 68-69.

²¹ “Summary of UNRRA DP Operations in Germany, 1945,” *UNRRA Monthly Review* 1, no. 17 (January 1946), 18.

²² William I. Hitchcock, *The Bitter Road to Freedom: The Human Cost of Allied Victory in World War II Europe* (New York: Free Press, 2008): 250.

as necessary. Promoted and supported by UNRRA, cultural and social life flourished in the camps. While viewed by UNRRA personnel as part of their mandate to rehabilitate, for the DPs themselves these activities represented a drive to re-establish some degree of normalcy in their lives, and build communities, however temporary and transitory, in the often unsavory setting of the camps.

Community building efforts were multifaceted. Religious life flourished and churches of various denominations appeared in many camps. The arts prospered; theatre and other performance arts were especially popular. One American Military Police officer wrote from Germany to a Ukrainian diaspora paper, *The Ukrainian Weekly* (Jersey City, New Jersey), on the generally destitute condition of Ukrainian DPs, but noted that the camp he visited organized a fine chorus and folk dance performance.²³ In Lübeck, most of the Latvian ballet company was reconstituted, as was an orchestra in a nearby camp.²⁴ Sporting and social events were also very popular. Eksteins' possession of a football brought power and prestige to the four-year-old in the Lübeck camp,²⁵ while fifteen-year-old Russian Vera Stakhanova, who spent years in flight after her parents collaborated with German occupation authorities, remarked that weekly dances held at Bauleitung DP Camp, Austria, were actually beginning to make her life fun again.²⁶ Christmas festivities at Wildflecken in 1945 were so exuberant that Hulme could only explain them as all the missed celebrations of the past six years condensed into one.²⁷ There was also a great

²³ "From a letter to the editor of *The Ukrainian Weekly*, published by the Ukrainian National Association, written by a former New York City policeman and now an M.P. in the American occupation zone in Germany, Pfc. Harry Polche. (September 20, 1945)," in *Plight of Ukrainian DPs: a few typical letters of many being received daily from Europe describing the tragic plight of Ukrainian displaced persons whom the Soviets would forcibly repatriate and doom to enslavement, persecution or death* (New York: Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, 1945), 17-18.

²⁴ Eksteins, 161.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁶ Nadia Stakhanova, Natasha Stakhanova, and Vera Stakhanova, with Charles Cherry, *Separated at Stavropol: A Russian Family's Memoir of Wartime Flight* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005), 8-9.

²⁷ Hulme, 99, 108-109.

emphasis placed on education. Elementary and secondary schools were established in camps, where education often took on a strong national character. By October 1945, 200,000 children were receiving schooling in the camps.²⁸ Three universities were established and operated, albeit only for a short time, to meet DP demand for higher education: the Free Ukrainian University in Augsburg, the UNRRA University in Munich, and the Baltic University in Hamburg, where Eksteins' father taught English.²⁹ In addition to academic studies, UNRRA also offered vocational training programs.³⁰ Political organization and activity, considered in depth by Holian's aforementioned study, also flourished in the DP camps. UNRRA and occupation authorities encouraged DPs to form camp committees—and indeed, UNRRA's very limited personnel made these committees necessary to the camps' functioning. These organizations were limited to issues of camp administration by occupation authorities, who were concerned that DP politics and anti-repatriation propaganda would antagonize the Soviet Union.³¹ In practice, though, welfare and social activities were difficult to distinguish from political ones, and authorities often tolerated political activity while avoiding formally recognizing or licensing political organizations.³² These DP political organizations were frequently nationalist in character.

It seems that efforts to build communities were often very successful. In 1947, when UNRRA was replaced by the IRO, their reduced budget meant that smaller camps were closed in favour of larger, more economical camps. Kathryn Hulme, by this time the director of seven DP

²⁸ "DP Children Get UNRRA Schooling," *UNRRA Monthly Review* 1, no.15 (November 1945), 6.

²⁹ Wyman, 123-127; and Eksteins, 163.

³⁰ "Summary of UNRRA DP Operations in Germany, 1945," 19.

³¹ Holian, 48-52.

³² *Ibid.*, 55.

camps around Aschaffenburg, Bavaria, described the close-out of these camps as a hideous business:

Even when the camp to be liquidated was only a wood barrack shantytown like our White Russian center a few miles down-river from Aschaffenburg, a place from which you would have thought the DP's would run with joy, it was a little Eden in their eyes ... I felt like a monster when I told our White Russians that their camp was closing and that within a week the boxcars would...take them and all their belongings to a big Stateless camp in another part of Germany.³³

Through community building efforts, homes were made of even the most rudimentary accommodations. But not everyone shared Hulme's sentiments; some were concerned that community building efforts had been too successful and were preventing repatriation. In 1946, the American Army shuffled DPs around their occupation zone to prevent DPs from putting down roots, and UNRRA declared vocational training programs were not to last more than 60 days so as not to discourage repatriation.³⁴ The transitory nature of their existence in the camps, then, certainly did not escape the DPs. Eksteins said it was not any lack of activity, but the sense of limbo and uncertainty about the future that took its toll. The semblance of normal life and community that the DPs and UNRRA created through social and cultural life, combined with this uncertainty, created in the camps what Hulme aptly called "a strange half-world" or a "startlingly real shadow life."³⁵

Interaction with the World Beyond the Camps

A significant component of life in the DP camps was interaction with the world outside them. This contact took place through three main channels: local German populations, the illicit economy, and repatriation and, later, emigration officials. Relations between DPs and Germans

³³ Hulme, 196-197.

³⁴ Hulme, 149; and "UNRRA Vocational Training and Employment Programs," *UNRRA Monthly Review* 1, no. 20 (April 1946), 25.

³⁵ Hulme, xi, 192.

were typically very poor. Most Germans viewed the DPs as “dirty foreigners”³⁶ and deeply resented their consumption of resources and better rations. Much of Wildflecken DP Camp’s food supplies came from German sources, and obtaining these supplies was a daily fight for Hulme and her staff.³⁷ These negative feelings were often mutual; Hulme also describes how some DPs took their revenge against German civilians they saw as responsible for their plight. A German would be invited to the camp for a tour, and taken to its trading mart, with such irresistible goods as cigarettes, margarine, and chocolate bars. The tipped-off DP police would then arrest the German for illegal entry into the camp and possession of unauthorized goods, and turn them over to the Military Government for trial. According to Hulme, many “ancient grudges” were settled in this way.³⁸ DPs were also very active in the illicit economy. Many participated in the grey market—Eksteins’ mother, for example, frequently travelled to the countryside around Lübeck to trade the cigarettes she received as a camp Girl Guide leader for food.³⁹ The Stakhanovs, who as previously mentioned had collaborated with the Germans and became DPs in their flight ahead of the Soviet advance, also engaged in this type of activity. Vera Stakhanova and her mother Nadia made papier-mâché toys and sold them to locals of surrounding villages.⁴⁰ The Stakhanovs also became involved in the black market proper: at Ranshofen, a village just outside of Braunau DP Camp, Austria, where they moved at the end of 1946, the family became involved in an alcohol distillation operation. Once a month, Vera smuggled flasks into Salzburg in a raincoat altered to have additional pockets.⁴¹ This second

³⁶ Hulme, 26.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

³⁹ Eksteins, 170.

⁴⁰ Stakhanova et al., 7.

⁴¹ Stakhanova et al., 167-168.

enterprise proved much more lucrative than the first. Polish DPs at Wildflecken developed a way to smuggle stolen cows into the camp for butchering and sale in the winter. Tracks in the snow would lead from farms to a few yards away from the camp, then disappear, much to the consternation of the German police. To achieve this, the DPs “had made from sacks immense padded carpet slippers which they had put on the cow’s four feet at the point of the disappearing footprints.”⁴² The black market favoured the ingenious.

DPs also had contact with the outside world through individuals who would help determine their futures: repatriation and emigration officials. Unsurprisingly, repatriation officials were typically ill-received in the camps, especially once repatriation rates lulled and those resisting repatriation remained. A letter to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Diocese of the United States described how the arrival of Soviet officers in a Ukrainian DP camp stirred alarm and terror; some DPs hid and others confronted the officers.⁴³ The arrival of Polish liaison officers for repatriation at Wildflecken in 1947—after Communist coercion in the Polish national elections in January 1947—caused great uproar among the DPs. Hulme recounts how an angry crowd of DPs quickly turned into a mob, rocking the officers’ cars and pushing them down an icy hill with the officers inside.⁴⁴ Emigration officials were received entirely differently. The first such official to arrive in Aschaffenburg, a Belgian colonel seeking miners, was greeted by the DPs as a saviour—Hulme and her IRO coworkers were only slightly less enraptured.⁴⁵ This enthusiasm was tempered as it became clear just how highly selective various emigration

⁴² Hulme, 95-98.

⁴³ “From a personal letter addressed to the Chancellor of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Diocese of the USA., Philadelphia, Pa. (September 11, 1945),” in *Plight of Ukrainian DPs: a few typical letters of many being received daily from Europe describing the tragic plight of Ukrainian displaced persons whom the Soviets would forcibly repatriate and doom to enslavement, persecution or death* (New York: Ukrainian Congress Committee of America, 1945), 14.

⁴⁴ Hulme, 159-160.

⁴⁵ Hulme, 178-183.

programmes would be. The Eksteins and Stakhanov families both expressed great anxiety over securing emigration, as did Hulme on behalf of her favourite DPs.⁴⁶

This examination the experience of the diverse Soviet DP population shows that life in the DP camps, if transitory, was complex and multifaceted. The provision of basic needs, including shelter, clothing, medical care, and especially food, was a chief concern both of DPs and relief workers, but far from the only significant aspect of their lives. They built communities within the camps, engaging in rich and varied cultural, social, and political activities. Like the majority of people in postwar Europe, they engaged in the grey or black markets. Their relations with local populations were tense, with repatriation officials, hostile, and with emigration officials, hopeful. DPs have been called the human debris of modern warfare, but examining their experience of life in the camps shows them to be so much more. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet DPs resisted repatriation, remaining in the camps rather than returning to their Soviet or Soviet-occupied homelands. These people were actively trying to rebuild their lives, attain education and livelihoods, and promote nationalist agendas, and were ultimately seeking the fundamental freedoms for which the war had supposedly been fought—freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. They were confined to a shadow life in the camps until emigration suited the Western powers, and, even then, the terms were harsh; many families were forced to split up and leave elderly members behind, and many emigration schemes practically entailed indentured servitude. In many ways the DP problem, especially concerning non-repatriable or stateless DPs, is representative of postwar Europe, with life uprooted and disrupted on a massive scale, return to prewar conditions impossible, and obstacles to resolution immense.

⁴⁶ Eksteins, 103, 153; Hulme, 228-229, 263; and Stakhanova et al., 166.

Kathryn Hulme and her colleagues were often exasperated and deeply depressed by their work in the DP camps. She said that “[t]he UNRRA and Army directives that filtered down to us often made us wonder if anyone around those top-level round tables had ever seen a DP.”⁴⁷ Hulme also remarked that visitors were always surprised by how “normal” camp life was.⁴⁸ If people who sat at the top-level round tables had seen DPs; if more people were aware they were normal people seeking a more promising future for themselves and their families, would the DP problem have been resolved in a more satisfactory fashion? Here lies the significance of this history to our present. We cannot solve contemporary refugee crises without compassion and understanding, and, as with the history of postwar Europe’s displaced persons, we cannot achieve full understanding, much less compassion, without appreciating human experience.

⁴⁷ Hulme, 46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

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