

## Report by the United States War Department on the situation of displaced persons (5 July 1945)

**Caption:** On 5 July 1945, the US War Department issues an alarming report on the situation of refugees in Europe and Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War and describes the measures taken by the Allies to help displaced persons.

**Source:** The Department of State Bulletin. Dir. of publ. Department of State. 22.07.1945, No 317; vol. XIII; publication 2365. Washington: US Government Printing Office.

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**Publication date:** 22/10/2012

July 22, 1945

## Displaced Persons in Germany: Present Operations

[Released to the press by the War Department July 5]

The gigantic task of locating, registering, housing, feeding, and finally repatriating displaced persons is being rapidly cleared away in the Allied zone in Germany, and present prospects are that the problem will be substantially reduced within the next two months, it was announced on July 5.

The announcement was made by the Honorable John J. McCloy, Assistant Secretary of War and chairman of the Combined Civil Affairs Committee, Anglo-American Group, charged by the Combined Chiefs of Staff with the military responsibility of handling civilian problems contingent with and occurring in the wake of battle.

The problem of displaced persons — including prisoners of war in Germany, political and radical prisoners, and slave laborers — was one of the most complicated and urgent matters facing the Allies when they overran Germany and the Wehrmacht collapsed. Millions of persons of every nationality and every walk of life glutted the roads. Concentration camps were filled with helpless people. Many were starved and sick. All had but one goal — to get home.

The Allies uncovered almost 5,800,000 displaced persons. As of July 2, 3,260,000 of these had been repatriated to their home countries. Another 2,530,000 were being cared for in Allied displaced-persons camps awaiting repatriation or clarification of their nationality status, and another small group was estimated to be living outside displaced-persons camps.

All reports indicate steady improvement in the handling of displaced persons, and SHAEF has estimated that the entire problem may resolve itself by September 1 into caring for the residual of non-repatriables and stateless persons.

As of June 22, the number of persons repatriated, by nationalities, included: French — 1,243,600, of whom 142,693 were returned to France by air; Russian — 1,393,902; Belgians — 247,790, of whom 11,826 were repatriated by air; Dutch — 195,000; Italian — 136,043; Czechoslovak — 33,488; Yugoslav — 2,051; Luxemburgers — 6,000.

Of the 2,530,000 displaced persons still not repatriated, by far the largest group is Russian. The reason for this is that there was no feasible method of repatriating Russians until the German defeat and the Russians and Allies linked their fronts. Ratification on May 22 of the Leipzig agreement 1, through which the Allied military authorities agreed on a repatriation policy, is resulting in fast repatriation of Russians. Under this plan, a system of delivering displaced persons through Army lines at agreed reception-delivery points, ten on each side of the present USSR-SHAFF line, was set up. The effect of the agreement is illustrated by these figures. As of May 26, about 160,000 Russians had been turned over by the 21st and 12th Army Groups. By June 17, that figure had gone to 1,287,530.

Persons of French nationality comprised one of the largest displaced groups in Germany. The success of the displaced-persons program is illustrated by the fact that, of 1,249,282 French uncovered in the SHAEF zone within Germany, only about 40,552 remained to be repatriated as of June 18.

Behind these figures of the uncovering of 5,790,000 displaced persons and the repatriating of 3,260,000 as of mid-June lies a story full of drama.

Vast, ragged, hungry armies of people roamed the German countryside, and the Allies had to bring order out of chaos — channel the movement of the people; control public safety; provide medicines, food, temporary housing, clothing; delouse the people in order to prevent louse-borne diseases; determine nationality status of displaced persons and initiate processes that would start them on their way home. There were also the

matters of welfare and recreation, and in setting up displaced-persons camps the Allies took these two factors into consideration by providing proper sanitation facilities, the best available domestic conveniences, sports, recreation.

In German concentration camps were found starved, mentally numbed people in whom little life was left. Some had gone without food for so long that they would have died had they been allowed to eat normally. Facilities for intravenous feeding had to be supplied immediately. As an example of emergency steps taken in behalf of these people, a nutrition consultant and 143 Belgian medical students were rushed with top priority to the camp at Belsen to feed intravenously persons in stages of advanced malnutrition. Similar emergency steps were taken throughout the SHAEF area.

Following are examples of special steps taken in the Allied zone to provide care and comfort for displaced persons:

Special displaced-persons hospitals were set up where those who were ill got the best medical care, food, and facilities available.

Mobile film units were circulated to displaced-persons camps so that the former prisoners of the Germans, who had been denied many of the bare necessities of life, let alone any relaxation, could be entertained with the latest available American and British motion pictures.

Special dusting apparatus was flown in to delouse displaced persons and prevent the spread of disease, including the dreaded typhus.

German medical supplies and German food stocks, both from civilian sources and captured enemy stocks, were earmarked for the alleviation of displaced-persons feeding problems.

Special truck convoys and trains were set up to bring Red Cross relief supplies, stockpiled in Switzerland, to Allied prisoners of war and displaced persons in Germany.

Displaced persons have received highly preferential treatment in Germany. Army groups were instructed to raise living conditions of displaced persons to a standard as high as resources allow without consideration of any adverse effect on living conditions of the German people. A SHAEF directive ordered that Germans would be moved out of their homes and into former German concentration camps to provide shelter for displaced persons in German houses if such action were necessary.

By the end of summer, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, acting in behalf of and under agreement with military authorities, will have assumed virtually the entire manpower burden of handling displaced persons. The shift already has begun with UNRRA personnel now functioning in some 200 displaced-persons camps, 80 of them operated exclusively by UNRRA representatives. UNRRA is beginning to work its way into the problem by taking over on a camp-by-camp basis, and key personnel are sitting alongside army officers so they can be absorbed in the present administrative set-up.

As of June 22, 280 UNRRA teams and 14 voluntary-agency teams were deployed throughout the Allied zone in Germany, and about 4,729 persons, mostly Europeans, had been recruited by UNRRA for displaced-persons work.

The displaced-persons problem soon will have reduced itself largely to a matter of caring for stateless persons, non-repatriables, and unaccompanied children, many born in concentration camps. These present an extremely difficult problem since they represent the "hard core" of displaced persons.

UNRRA eventually will hand the problem over to the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, which will have the task of finding places for stateless and non-repatriable persons — those people whom the Nazis and the war turned into men without countries. This problem must be worked out at intergovernmental levels and hence is beyond the province of either UNRRA or military authorities. These stateless persons,

who comprise a comparatively small percentage of the displaced persons in Europe, must wait in camps until decisions are reached concerning their status and disposition.

General Eisenhower, at a press conference in Washington on June 18, said that the displaced-persons problem which faced the Allies when they overran Germany was “terrible”. After reviewing how the problem was met, the Supreme Allied Commander said:

“It was a terrible job to get the organization set up to take those people out. When you talk about persons in that number, their feeding and their housing for the night at way-stations, and so on, you have got a real task. The personnel in charge of Displaced Persons have done it beautifully, and the process of getting them out has been working most efficiently.”

1. The plan for the transfer through the Allied lines of former prisoners of war and displaced persons liberated by the Red Army and the Allied forces was signed May 20 by representatives of SHAEF and the Soviet High Command, effective May 23, implementing the Crimea agreement signed Feb. at Yalta.