

When the war was over: European refugees after 1945



Briefing Paper 4. Repatriation: Sending the DPs Home

The end of the Second World War in Europe in May 1945 brought liberation from Nazi captivity to several millions of Soviet citizens, who now became categorised as Displaced Persons (DPs). About 2.4 million Soviet DPs were Red Army soldiers who had been captured by the German army and survived the notorious Stalag prisoner-of-war camps. Conditions in the Stalags were terrible. The POWs suffered from bitter cold in winter, disease was rife among them because of poor sanitation and overcrowding, and during the war vast numbers – perhaps 60 per cent - were summarily executed by the Nazis, died of exposure or starved because of lack of rations. Approximately 4.3 million Soviet DPs in 1945 were civilians – old men, women and children – whom the Nazis had seized during their occupation of the western territories of the Soviet Union (including Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic republics and western and southern Russia) and taken back to Germany to put to work as slave labourers in factories, construction and farming. Many of these 'Eastern Workers' (in German: Ostarbeiter) died from illness, malnutrition, accidents or violent mistreatment. Among Soviet DPs were also Jews who had survived the Nazi concentration and extermination camps. A small minority of the Soviet DPs in 1945 were Soviet men who had either voluntarily joined or had been forcibly conscripted into the German armed forces.

During 1945 and 1946 most Soviet DPs were repatriated to Soviet territory. Some wished to remain in the West, especially those who had joined the German army and understood that return home meant execution or long imprisonment for treason. However, at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Soviet leader Josef Stalin had persuaded US President F.D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to agree to the compulsory repatriation of Soviet citizens. As a result, during 1945 the American and British military authorities despatched eastwards many Soviet men, mainly those who had fought for the Nazis, not to their homes, but towards captivity, forced labour and death. These men were sometimes accompanied by their wives and children, who shared their fate. Allied complicity in this forced repatriation remains controversial to this day.

As noted above, most Soviet DPs were not collaborators, but former POWs or Ostarbeiter, and most of these wished to return to the USSR to be reunited with their families and friends who had stayed at home and had survived the war. However, the Soviet authorities did not permit these DPs to travel home directly. Stalin regarded them with suspicion, for the simple reason that they had spent time abroad. Against a background of increasing tensions between the Soviet Union and the Allied powers, which would soon result in the Cold War, Stalin feared that

American, British or French authorities running DP camps were recruiting Soviet citizens as spies, saboteurs or political agitators before sending them home. He was also anxious that Soviet DPs while outside the Soviet Union had been infected by subversive 'bourgeois' attitudes and ideas, which they would bring home with them and spread among the population.

Therefore, both before and on their return to Soviet territory, repatriated Soviet citizens were confined in holding stations and camps, where they were subjected to screening - or, in Soviet terms, 'filtration' - pending either their return home or further resettlement or deportation. These 'filtration camps' were located at many major railway junctions in Germany and Poland, and in all large regional towns within the Soviet Union. While in the camps, returning DPs were subjected to repeated interrogation by the Soviet secret police. Their identification documents - with their photographs and fingerprints - were also carefully checked with records held by police authorities in their home towns or villages, to ensure they were who they claimed to be.

After staying a few days or weeks in these holding camps, where they also underwent checks for infectious diseases and received compulsory lectures and classes in communist ideology, most Soviet DPs were sent home, where they had to register at the local police station. The minority whose stories did not check out faced further investigation, and those who were then charged with collaboration and/or espionage - these numbered about 350,000 - faced imprisonment and forced labour or, occasionally, the death sentence..

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<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/postwar-refugees/index.aspx>

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