When the war was over:
European refugees after 1945

Briefing Paper 5. Homecoming in Eastern Europe

Homecoming in Eastern Europe was not a straightforward process, even for those DPs who wished to return home and who were allowed to do so following screening (in Soviet – filtration). Millions of Soviet citizens travelled back from the DP camps along roads and railways clogged with people on the move, arriving into a landscape strewn with smouldering rubble and encountering unfamiliar inhabitants in the places they had left behind during the war. It has been estimated that human losses in the Soviet Union during the war totalled over 26 million people. One returnee described the 'awful, difficult moments', when people went round addresses searching for friends and family only to be greeted by strangers and to find there was 'no-one left'.

Railways were overwhelmed throughout 1945. Within the Soviet Union, the railway system which had been damaged by the war was gradually being restored. The process of ending the war, however, produced social disruptions almost comparable with fighting it. Tens of millions of people had to be not just repatriated but also demobilised, returned from evacuation or released from wartime jobs to which they had been drafted. Russian émigré poet Joseph Brodsky described a railway station near Leningrad where he waited for a train as a five year old in 1945 as 'a picture of primeval chaos', where people 'were besieging the cattle trains like mad insects'.

Returning DPs travelled in specially designated trains. They could wait up to several months for an onward train at stations where the buildings were often in ruins, in some cases having to sleep out in the open air or in overcrowded, unhealthy, filthy premises. Whilst cases of outbreaks of diseases such as typhus decreased in number at the end of the war, government fear of disease led to the introduction of special measures aimed at the returning DPs. Before boarding trains they had to undergo compulsory medical examination and disinfecting their bodies, clothes, and luggage.

Leaving the train station behind did not necessarily signal an end to displacement for the DPs. As a result of filtration, some of those who had previously lived in the centre of major cities of the western Soviet Union, such as Moscow, Leningrad, or Kiev, were not allowed to return to their former residences but restricted to settlement in the suburban districts or in smaller towns and villages. For many DPs repatriated to areas recently incorporated into the Soviet Union, such as the Baltic republics, return to prewar homes was like arriving in a whole new country; one with an unfamiliar economic, administrative and political structure and with many

unrecognisable inhabitants. In Estonia, for example, 10-25 per cent of the prewar population had been lost by January 1945 and industrialisation had brought in a large Russian-speaking workforce.

In areas of the Soviet Union that had been subject to occupation or combat during the war problems remained with housing as late as 1956. Occupying German forces, according to Soviet figures, destroyed and plundered 1710 towns and more than 70,000 villages. Returning DPs whose homes had been destroyed found room to stay where they could, moving in with relatives or friends, cramming into overcrowded hostels, roaming from place to place or joining thousands of other families in makeshift shelters, such as the ruins of buildings, dark basements, barns, bathhouses, kitchens, attics, corridors, railway cars and barracks. Many others returned to find that their furniture and other personal belongings had been damaged or stolen during the war.

DPs, just like soldiers and evacuees, found it hard to overcome the experience of separation from their lives and families. Even those who had found families and friends struggled to reconcile their experiences with those who had served in the frontline, who had been in evacuation, or had remained in occupation, despite a sense that they were all part of a community of victors. Many of those returning were stigmatised by their time in enemy captivity.