

DISPLACED PERSONS

Background

At the close of the war in German territory there were millions of refugees and people who had been removed from their homelands and brought to Germany by the Nazi German regime. These people became known as “displaced persons,” or “DPs.” Some six million people returned to their native countries in the aftermath of the fighting; however, between 1.5 and 2 million refused to do so. Some were afraid they would be called traitors in their homelands, since in some capacity they had served the Nazis. Others—especially the Jews—felt they had no reason to go home, since their families and communities had been obliterated.

The Jewish refugee situation was completely different from that of non-Jewish refugees. They were a tiny remnant that had survived a great destruction in that one-third of the world Jewish population had been murdered during the Holocaust. Some Jewish survivors, especially from Western European countries, returned to their homelands with the general flow of refugees, expecting to be treated with consideration, but usually being greeted with callousness. Others, especially from Central and Eastern European countries, decided not to return to their former homes, knowing that there was really nothing to go back to and that going back would force them to confront the burden of their memories with no one left to share them. Some realized that returning to their homes could lead to confrontation with hostile elements of the local population, who were happy that the Jews had “disappeared.”

Special DP camps were set up to provide shelter and food for the displaced persons. In general, DP camps were organized and run by the United States, British, and French armies and an agency of the United Nations, the United Nations Refugee Relief Agency (UNRRA). Initially conditions in these camps were deplorable, with Jews sometimes being forced to live alongside those who had recently persecuted them. On a visit to a camp in 1945, Earl Harrison, President Harry Truman’s Special Envoy to the UNRRA, wrote to the President, “We appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them, except that we don’t exterminate them.” Reports by influential individuals eventually resulted in improved conditions and the establishment of Jewish camps in the American-administered zone of Germany. The DP camps operated until as late as 1953, when the last camp was closed down.

250,000 Jews
in DP camps by 1946

In Germany: 185,000

In Austria: 45,000

In Italy: 20,000

Questions

- What percent of the total number of displaced persons returned to their homes after World War II?
- Why did most Jews not want to return to their former countries?
- What can you conclude about conditions in the DP camps based on the reading?
- What do you think were the different motivations of the Allies to deal with the issue of the DPs?
- Do you think there should have been Jewish DPs camps? Why or why not?