

Czechs in Displaced Persons Camps

Project Synopsis

The period of the Cold War was once distinguished from other periods of international conflict by the magnitude and importance given to the ideological conflict between the two principal contending social systems, the United States representing the West and the Soviet Union as the leading force of the Eastern Bloc, and by the methods employed to pursue this struggle. Czechoslovakia played a significant role on the chessboard of the world powers.

On February 25, 1948, Czechoslovak President Edvard Beneš accepted the resignation of twelve ministers from three democratic parties. This step allowed the Communist Prime Minister Klement Gottwald to refill the cabinet, with members of the same parties (maintaining the formal distribution of power), but he chose people from these parties who were secret “Trojan horses”, obedient to the Communists. From this moment on, the floodgates of communist despotism and oppression opened - the leading politicians, journalists, and academics, those who criticized the methods of the „Reds“ did not linger; they fled Czechoslovakia, before they could be imprisoned.

In the search for accurate data on this post-February exile, we encounter very different figures. Researchers are still unable to agree on the size of individual waves of emigration, but the estimates from the first two years describe 60,000 Czechs and Slovaks, who fled the country. This emigration included workers and farmers as well as members of the cultural, scientific, intellectual, and political elites. Before they launched their anti-communist campaigns from exile all over the globe, their first steps into the free world brought these people into the displaced persons camps of Western occupied zones of Germany and Austria and in Italy. These facilities were under the administration of the International Refugee Organization (IRO), one of the UN agencies based in Switzerland. Between 1947 and 1952 the whole refugee agenda in Western Europe was under the control of this institution. In July 1948, the IRO admitted Czechs and Slovaks to the status of political refugees, with the same legal protection and „benefits“ as the other prior residents of the camps (Baltic peoples, Ukrainians, Cossacks, Bulgarians, Romanians, Poles and others). It is largely forgotten that more than 20 million people in Europe were living outside their home countries by the end of World War Two. These included former Jewish prisoners in concentration camps, forced laborers returning from Germany, expelled German minorities from Eastern Europe and, above all, people escaping from Stalin and his Communist regimes or refusing repatriation behind the Iron Curtain. Therefore, the IRO and a number of humanitarian organizations and refugee assistance groups had their hands full of tragic human fates.

Some of the displaced persons camps were meant to host only one nationality (there were separate Latvian, Polish or Ukrainian camps, for example) but, in most

cases, several nationalities were living together. The Czechs and Slovaks ended up in various locations. The largest groups temporarily and involuntarily lived in numerous camps in the Western occupation zones of Germany, such as Valka-Nürnberg, Ludwigsburg, Schwabach, Delmenhorst, Wildflecken, Nellingen, Bad Aibling, Schwäbisch Gmünd, Hof-Moschendorf, Unterjettingen, Dieburg, Wasseralfingen, Schwabach, Murnau, Ulm and many others. In Austria it was, above all, Hellbrunn-Salzburg, Wegscheid-Linz, Innsbruck, Wels, Trofaiach, and in Italy the camps Bagnoli, Trani and Pagani.

Accommodation for refugees in these facilities met only the most basic requirements. Wooden shacks, former prisoner-of-war camps, military barracks, schools, factories, or even more primitive housing, such as tents, train cars and various provisional types of housing were pressed into service. The newly arrived refugees were carefully interviewed and given some degree of protection or declared ineligible for protection by the IRO.

The atmosphere in these camps was extremely tense because there was a widespread belief that the Cold War could quickly change into an armed conflict between the USA and the USSR. But as time passed, people remained long months, or even years, in the camps, sending visa application and waiting for work permits and transport to a new home.

I would liken the camps to a unique microcosm, where you could have found prostitution, a black market, subversive activities of Communist informants, violent and boozy clashes as well as churches, chapels, libraries, schools, kindergartens, shops, craft workshops, sport associations, Boy Scout troops, even the recruitment offices for Western armies. Moreover, in the camps the first magazines, brochures and leaflets were published, and the first seeds of political activity were born. For example, some of the political parties, banned by the Communists at home, re-established their structures in the modest camp conditions. The entire phenomenon of the daily life behind the walls of the camps is a great interest of mine. I have visited a number of archives and libraries in recent years and assembled various bits of information related to this topic. However, I would like to ask all colleagues for assistance. If they have any material related to Czech refugees in DP camps in Germany, Austria and Italy after 1948, kindly let me know. I'm interested in the official records, deposited in Bundesarchiv in Berlin, International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen, Bayrisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Staatsarchiv München, Sudetendeutsches Archiv and another regional archives as well as family material, photos, correspondence, diaries and various artifacts revealing significant details about the DP camps.

I see with satisfaction that a number of high quality studies of Cold War displaced persons issues from a variety of angles has begun to appear in recent years. Above all, the fate of Jewish refugees in the complexities of war-damaged Europe in the late 1940s has become a subject of interest to historians in many countries. Nevertheless, Czech historiography still ignores the need to remember that thousands of its fellow citizens who fled from the totalitarian regime, creating a mass of nameless, unwanted refugees which filled the camps. Because of the current refugee crisis, this topic is still alive, worthy of comparison and thorough analysis. I hope my research may add some important insights to this discourse.