

RESEARCH ARCHIVES†

Records of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration 1943–1948*

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Documentation relating to refugees and displaced persons is dispersed among the United Nations Archives, where a limited volume of material pertaining to refugee organizations and refugee-related peace-keeping operations of the United Nations, dating from 1945, is allocated among records of the Office of the Secretary-General, Office of Legal Affairs, various peace-keeping missions and commissions, and the Registry. There are, additionally, several thousand case files of the United States Branch of the International Refugee Organization. None of this documentation is as comprehensive or voluminous, however, as records of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), 1943–48.

UNRRA records result from an agreement among forty-four United Nations and associated governments on November 9 1943, pledging to:

plan, coordinate, administer or arrange for the administration of measures for the relief of victims of war in any area under the control of any of the United Nations through the provision of food, fuel, clothing, shelter and other basic necessities, medical and other essential services (UNRRA Agreement, Article I, Section 2).

To effect this promise, the signatories created an international relief organization which, at its peak in 1946, employed a staff of 25,000 persons at its headquarters in Washington, its European Regional Office in London, and in sixteen country missions that distributed supplies and provided technical advice on agricultural and industrial rehabilitation, health, welfare and displaced persons. In league with five non-member governments and a number of private sources, UNRRA provided 24,106,891 long tons of supplies, services, and cash valued at \$3,872,749,021 to seventeen recipient nations over a period of four years (Woodbridge 1950, I:147 and II:371).

The documentary history of this enterprise amounts to approximately 1,150 metres, much of which covers UNRRA's displaced persons operations, a responsibility undertaken by the organization because of the potential for

uprooted populations to disrupt military operations, spread disease and wreak economic and social chaos. Despite the worthy goals of providing the displaced with food, shelter, medicine, and the return to their homes, UNRRA's efforts in this area caused widespread misunderstanding among member governments. This occurred with the expansion of UNRRA services, originally consisting of care for United Nations nationals and stateless persons displaced by war, to include also the repatriation of intruded enemy nationals, 'persecutees' of whatever nationality located in enemy or liberated territories, and displaced citizens of UNRRA member governments. Return of the latter group to country of origin put the organization in the centre of a dispute involving forced repatriation, with the Soviet Union and its political allies on one side and remaining UNRRA members on the other. As a result of confusion regarding the organization's role in this matter and also in displaced persons operations *vis-à-vis* military authorities in liberated areas, this programme, employing more staff than any of UNRRA's other field operations, was controversial.

Nevertheless, prior to the transfer of displaced persons functions of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) in 1947, UNRRA supervised displaced persons operations located, for the most part, in the American, British, and French zones of Germany and Austria, and in Italy, the Middle East and China. First operating in the Middle East, where it took over supervision of camps formerly under the direction of the Middle East Relief and Refugee Administration (MERRA), it also administered 921 assembly centres in Germany and thirty-eight in Austria at the peak of its operations. In Italy, more than fifty per cent of UNRRA-assisted displaced persons lived outside assembly centres, receiving goods from a combination of government and UNRRA sources. On the other side of the world, the China Mission repatriated approximately 21,000 overseas Chinese to Singapore, Malaya and Burma, and about 8,600 externally displaced Chinese back to China. Additionally, it assisted about 15,000 Europeans in Shanghai, one-third of whom were either repatriated or resettled (Woodbridge 1950, II:442 and 502).

Most of UNRRA's work took place in Europe, where the number of displaced persons approached 21 million by mid-1943. Where such individuals required housing, UNRRA teams established assembly centres in edifices ranging from converted barracks or concentration camps to castles, where they provided infirmaries, assistance to the physically handicapped, occupational training and work programmes. Encouraged to exercise self-government in anticipation of their release, residents created camp committees, police and fire control patrols, educational programmes and even orchestras and theatre companies. Of special note was UNRRA's care of unaccompanied children and the work of its Central Tracing Bureau, which searched for persons lost in Germany.

UNRRA records, arranged according to the archival principle of provenance, provide a multi-faceted perspective of the organization's work. Documentation created at UNRRA Headquarters in Washington, D.C., particularly within the offices of the Director-General and General Counsel, approach the subject of displaced persons from policy and legal angles. Topics include UNRRA's

relations with national governments, occupation forces, the IRO and various voluntary organizations engaged in similar endeavours, such as national Red Cross agencies. In addition to records covering displaced persons operations *per se*, file titles span a wide array of related topics, such as 'Emergency Food Collection', 'Grain Crisis' and many others.

Also in Washington, the Bureau of Services reviewed the management of camps, determination of individuals' eligibility for UNRRA benefits, procedures regarding the identification, registration, care and repatriation of displaced persons and the organization of supplies and services for related operations. Records of its Displaced Persons and Repatriation and Welfare Divisions are particularly valuable. Consisting mainly of subject files, reports, and correspondence, this documentation defines UNRRA's relationship with national governments and military bodies and includes comprehensive information on categories of displaced persons, camp policy and procedures, tracing activities, child care, nutrition, health, vocational and occupational training, repatriation and the like. Tucked among the Bureau's records is a particularly interesting series of several hundred migration and resettlement studies created at the Library of Congress between 1942 and 1945 by 'Project M'. Ranging in subject from Jewish colonies in Saskatchewan to Italians in Argentina and agriculture in Soviet Asia, these reports, lectures and translations from Japanese and Russian sources cover the movement and settlement of populations, immigration policy and related matters.

Records of the European Regional Office (ERO) in London and its counterpart in Washington, the Office of Far Eastern Affairs (OFEA), as their names imply, provide a level of intermediate documentation between policy and functional records produced at UNRRA Headquarters and operational records created by the various country missions. The Director-General delegated responsibility for mission and displaced persons operations to the ERO, and the latter's Relief Services Registry, in particular, offers documentation on health, welfare and repatriation activities within UNRRA's European recipients. OFEA functioned similarly, coordinating UNRRA activities in the Pacific region, where the most comprehensive operation, by far, took place in China. Displaced persons efforts in the Far East, however, were not as large as those in Europe, where they were a major component of UNRRA's total programme and involved collaboration with Allied occupational forces. Rather, they consisted of civilian relief, and the OFEA Registry reflects this regional difference. For insight both into camp operations in Europe and relief activities in the Far East, there are the records of the various UNRRA missions: Albania, Austria, Balkans and Middle East, Byelorussia, China, Czechoslovakia, Dodecanese Islands, Ethiopia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Philippines, Poland and Yugoslavia.

Although the Office of the Historian's primary function was to prepare UNRRA's three-volume *History of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration*, it also oversaw the writing of a number of monographs on the work of the organization's component units. Unintended for publication, these

were the subjective accounts of UNRRA operating officials, and as such, many of them are more critical of UNRRA's efforts than is the organization's official *History*. Ninety-one monographs, alone, make up the 'DP' series. An additional number of 'country' and topical monographs expand this collection of historical material on displaced persons.

Supplementing these UNRRA records are official documents and publications generated by the organization's policy-making bodies. Among them are documents produced during the six meetings of UNRRA's plenary Council and its several planning and advisory sub-committees. The smaller Central Committee, consisting at first of China, Soviet Union, United Kingdom and the United States, until its later expansion, coped with all aspects of UNRRA's activities between sessions of the Council, including displaced persons. In some areas, such as repatriation, a study of Central Committee documents, as well as those of the two regional bodies, the Central Committee for Europe (CCE) and the Central Committee for the Far East (CCFE), previews schisms along national lines, characteristic of the post-war period. Of the remaining subsidiary committees, documents of the Standing Technical Committee on Displaced Persons are important for information regarding technical advice in support of UNRRA policies.

Access to these records is unrestricted and available upon appointment with the United Nations Archives between Monday and Friday, 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. All inquiries should be addressed to the United Nations Archives, PK-1200, United Nations, New York, NY 10017.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE (1943) 'First Session of the Council of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration', *Selected Documents, Conference 53, Publication 2040*, I: 1-25.
WOODBIDGE, G. (1950) *UNRRA the History of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, I-III*, New York, Columbia University Press.

*The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.

†A new occasional series documenting and describing archival sources for the study of refugees and forced migrants. Further contributions are welcome.

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