

## American Immigration Policy 1945-1950

Most congressmen knew little about displaced persons, could not understand why they had not gone home after the war, and feared an economic depression or a glut on the labor market if a large number of immigrants started coming to the United States.

Hearings on the Stratton measure were held in the summer of 1947, but no bill was reported on the floor of the House of Representatives. President Truman, first in January 1947, and again in July, called upon Congress to produce suitable legislation to aid displaced persons, but did not endorse the Stratton bill. In the middle of July, The New York Times reported that "canvasses indicated the proposed mass entry of DPs faced determined, possibly majority opposition.

The key to passage of displaced-persons legislation lay in the Senate. The House of Representatives was not prepared to pass any bill unless favorable action seemed likely in the upper chamber. After an initial period of hesitation, in which appeared that no bill would be passed, the propaganda by the Citizens Committee, subsequent letters to representatives and senators, and newspaper editorials urging action began to take effect. Congress received more mail - most of which was favorable — on aiding the displaced persons than on any other subject since Prohibition. Republican Senator Alexander Wiley of Wisconsin complained "that he could not walk down the streets of his home town without someone like his banker, butcher or former Sunday School teacher stopping him and saying 'Senator, why aren't you a good Christian? Why are you against DPs?' "

Unfortunately for the displaced persons, Senator Chapman Revercomb of West Virginia chaired the Immigration Subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and his views were anything but favorable toward helping them. He had done a study of the displaced persons for the Republican Steering Committee in December 1946, and in conclusion to his report he observed:

Many of those who seek entrance into this country have little concept of our form of government. Many of them come from lands where

Communism had its first growth and dominates the political thought and philosophy of the people. Certainly it would be a tragic blunder to bring into our midst those imbued with a communistic line of thought when one of the most important tasks of this government today is to combat and eradicate Communism from this country.

The West Virginia senator's remarks were practically blasphemous and showed contempt for those who had suffered most from the war and during its aftermath. The Washington Post editor realized that if the Congress allowed itself to be guided by Revercomb's views "there will be little of either charity or understanding in our treatment of Europe's refugees."

When the Senate appeared ready to consider DP legislation in the summer of 1947, Revercomb urged his colleagues to schedule a Senate inspection tour of the displaced-persons in Europe before taking action. After lengthy debate the Senate agreed to this proposal and Revercomb was appointed to head the tour.

In the fall of 1947, both the House of Representatives and the Senate sent committees to investigate the DP camps. The Citizens Committee sponsored an inspection tour of the camps by Commander Paul Griffith of the American Legion, who thereafter changed his position and endorsed emergency legislation to aid DPs. Both the House and Senate committees also reached the conclusion that something should be done for the people there. The House report noted:

If the Jewish facet of the problem could be cleared up, the solution of the remainder of the problem could be facilitated. The opening of Palestine to the resettlement of Jewish displaced persons would break the logjam.

Around the same time, the governors of several midwestern states established local commissions to study possibilities of resettling DPs in their midst. Finally, and perhaps most important for the future passage of legislation, Robert A. Taft, the Republican leader of the Senate, called for "immediate action" to help the DPs. As winter began, it seemed likely that Congress would act.

In the second session of the Eightieth Congress, Frank Fellows of Maine, chairman of the Subcommittee on Immigration of the House Judiciary Committee, proposed a measure that called for the admission of 200,000 DPs

from among those who had registered by April 21, 1947. Those admitted were to be charged against future immigration quotas for their countries of origin. In the Senate Revercomb's committee proposed legislation that would admit 100,000 DPs over a two-year period, confine eligibility to those who had been in the DP camps by December 22, 1945, and reserve 50 percent of the visas for agricultural workers. It also suggested that 50 percent of those admitted come from those states of Europe that had been annexed by Russia after the war.

Two significant amendments to the bill were passed. One increased the total number of DPs to be admitted to the United States to 100,000 per year for two years, while the other, proposed by Senator William Langer of North Dakota, gave preference to the Volksdeutsche, those Germans expelled from Eastern Europe after the war. Langer, the only member of the Senate Judiciary Committee to oppose even the Revercomb plan in a committee vote, believed that the Volksdeutsche were "much worse off than the so-called displaced persons", most of whom he assumed "are related to residents [i.e., Jews] of New York City."

The measure passed the Senate by a vote of sixty-three to thirteen. Harrison called it a "booby trap" and urged the House of Representatives to reject the Fellows Bill in order to undo the "monstrosity of Senate action", which discriminated on religious, national, and occupational grounds.

President Truman appointed three liberals — Ugo Carusi, Edward M. O'Connor, and Harry N. Rosenfield to head the Displaced Persons Commission in August 1948, and their interpretation of the Displaced Persons Act was so broad, and their acceptance of questionable documents so frequent, that they undermined the thrust of the bigoted legislation, and more Jews entered the United States than had been anticipated. When conservative Democratic Senator Pat McCarran of Nevada investigated the Displaced Persons Commission in 1949, he accused it of lax procedures that allowed Communists and other subversives into the United States (the senator did not mention Fascists or Nazis, since their admission apparently did not upset him), and the frightened commissioners began adhering to the letter of the law. They also led the charge to liberalize the Displaced Persons

Act of 1948, which Congress did in June 1950. Thereafter the displaced persons ceased being a significant concern of Americas Jews or the Congress.

The year 1950 marked the end of Jewish concern about displaced persons because those Jews who wanted to eliminate what they considered the especially antisemitic provisions of the 1948 DP act had accomplished their purpose. Congress changed the cut-off date to 1949 and did away with the preferences for persons from annexed territories and agricultural workers. Furthermore, by 1950, most of the Jewish DPs had left the assembly centers for Israel, the United States, or other countries.

On the international scene, the formation of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) in 1947, an agency designed to help resettle the million-plus displaced persons still residing in Europe, helped to unplug the bottleneck in the displaced-persons centers and promoted the exodus to other countries. By 1947, in fact, several of the world's nations, realizing that they needed able-bodied people, sought displaced persons from the European assembly centers. Most countries wanted young, strong Gentiles; none expressed a preference for Jews. Belgium picked 20,000 Baltics and Ukrainians to work in the mines, and the British took about 30,000 single adults for agricultural, mining and domestic task.

**Source: Dinnerstein, Leonard, "The United States and the Displaced Persons", in: Gutman, Yisrael and Saf, Avital (eds.), *She'arit Hapleta 1944-1948, Rehabilitation and Political Struggle, Proceedings of the Sixth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1990, pp. 357-363 .**