



The Last Million: Europe's Displaced Persons from World War to Cold War

by David Nasaw.

New York: Penguin, 2020. Pp. xii, 654. ISBN 978-1-59420-673-3.

Review by Simone Paoli, The University of Pisa (simone.paoli@sp.unipi.it).

In his new book, historian David Nasaw¹ (CUNY Graduate Center, emeritus) has written an astonishingly well informed history of displaced persons (DPs) in postwar Europe, specifically, the one million Eastern Europeans who refused to return home. He describes their lives in refugee camps and the effects they had on the broader international system in the crucial period from the mid-1940s to the early 1950s.

The DPs found themselves in one of the four postwar occupation zones in Germany. They included former forced laborers, POWs, and concentration camp survivors. Hidden among them was a large group of Nazi collaborators. The Allied military authorities confined them in holding centers before their repatriation. Most DPs were eager to return home, and the Allies had agreed at the Yalta Conference that repatriation was the best course of action. The Soviet Union was especially determined to bring back all its citizens because it would provide a chance to punish war criminals hiding in the camps and, more importantly, to mobilize reserves of labor needed to rebuild a country in ruins. The Western Allies, for their part, favored repatriation as a means to stabilize Europe and reduce the financial and administrative costs of managing and assisting the DPs.

While returning Western DPs was relatively easy and rapid, repatriation of Easterners was more complicated: there were many more DPs in the East than in the West and the transport infrastructure was in worse shape on the Eastern front. Nonetheless, “the repatriation campaign succeeded beyond expectations” (8) in both regions. Between May and September 1945, virtually all French, Italian, Dutch, Belgian, and Luxembourgish people living in the camps in Germany returned home. Meanwhile, most Soviet, Polish, Czech, Yugoslav, and Hungarian DPs also made it back to their home countries. The problem was that a million DPs either did not wish to return home or lacked one to go back to. Consequently, they remained in the camps, a situation US congressman John Gibson called the “venomous postscript” to the Second World War.²

Some of the Last Million, mostly from the Baltic states and western Ukraine, had collaborated with the Nazis and wanted to escape Soviet justice. Some Polish Catholics refused to return to a country devastated by war, riven by political and social tensions, increasingly influenced by Soviets and Communists, and even partially annexed by Moscow. There were Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians unwilling to live in Communist countries annexed by the USSR or fearing false charges of collaboration. Finally, many Jewish survivors had lost their families and homes or did not wish to return to inhospitable “homelands.”

1. A past president of the Society of American Historians, Nasaw is best known for three award-winning biographies: *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), *Andrew Carnegie* (NY: Penguin, 2006), and *The Patriarch: The Remarkable Life and Turbulent Times of Joseph P. Kennedy* (id., 2012).

2. Linda McDowell, *Hard Labour: The Hidden Voices of Latvian Migrant “Volunteer” Workers* (NY: Routledge, 2005) 38.

Conditions in the camps were particularly harsh for the Jewish minority, who were in worse physical and psychological health than the non-Jews and found it hard to assert their needs. After being persecuted with the active connivance of their non-Jewish countrymen, they often had to live in close proximity to individuals “whose families had stolen from them, tortured them, or served over them as *kapos* or guards in the various camps” (69). Despite pressure from Jewish organizations within and outside the camps, however, neither the American and British militaries nor the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) recognized the unique suffering of Jewish DPs or gave them any special assistance.

The Jewish DPs wanted to emigrate to the United States or Palestine. But the Americans resisted mass immigration of Eastern Europeans. Its State Department and the British Government opposed opening Palestine to the immigration of Jewish DPs, fearing to antagonize the Arabs and further exacerbate regional tensions. Things came to a head on 22 June 1945, when Pres. Harry Truman dispatched Earl Harrison, Dean of the Univ. of Pennsylvania Law School, to assess the living conditions and desires of the Last Million, with particular attention to the Jews. The ensuing Harrison Report stressed the need to improve the conditions of Jewish DPs and recommended allowing them to emigrate to Palestine. But the British upheld their Mandate and the United States did not increase the quotas assigned to Eastern Europeans, though the Americans did greatly improve the conditions of Jewish DPs in their zone of occupation.

Meanwhile, the Allied military authorities, in cooperation with various charitable organizations and UNRRA, converted the camps from temporary facilities to more permanent communities divided by nationality. Officially, repatriation remained the Allies’ priority. Against Soviet and Yugoslav wishes, however, they and UNRRA recognized the DPs’ right to refuse repatriation and affirmed the international commitment to their assistance. The Soviets and their allies in Eastern Europe were not alone in demanding that the camps be closed at once. Between December 1945 and January 1946, the US War Department and British military officials warned that “the burden of policing and supplying the DP camps had become untenable” (198). Specifically, they feared that the upcoming dissolution of UNRRA would leave the entire burden of caring for the Last Million to the occupying armies.

The option to close the camps was unattractive for political reasons. President Truman did not want to rouse the ire of the Catholic clergy or Polish ethnic associations. The British Labour Party feared the release of hundreds of thousands of non-repatriable Eastern Europeans into German society would cause chaos. The British Foreign Office also believed that closing the camps for non-Jewish DPs would raise questions about doing the same for Jewish ones, which would in turn put unwanted pressure on the British to allow them to emigrate to Palestine (207).

After the Kielce pogrom (4 July 1946), the Jews’ flight out of Poland accelerated and, despite British attempts to stop them, Jewish DPs poured into the camps in Germany. Fiorello La Guardia, UNRRA Director General, then tried to empty the camps by encouraging non-Jewish Poles to return home. Against the backdrop of incipient confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, however, this strategy was bluntly dismissed by the Polish American Congress, the Catholic Church, and the US Administration as “a Communist ploy to capture and imprison innocent DPs whose only wish was to live in freedom” (266). The West no longer considered repatriation to be a viable option.

On 15 December 1946, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) began to assume the functions previously performed by UNRRA. While the latter had been a truly international organization, the IRO “was rather a creature of the Americans and the British, funded by, staffed by, and beholden to them” (292). While UNRRA aimed at repatriating the Last Million to their for-

mer homelands, the IRO focused on resettling all the DPs who refused repatriation outside Germany. The ball was then in the court of Western countries. While the United States was preoccupied with a long, bitter dispute over its immigration policy, Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Australia, and Canada each took a share of DPs. Political and humanitarian considerations blended with economic interests. Prospective resettlement countries aimed not only to rescue DPs from the camps or Communist rule, but also to gain a valuable labor resource.

Thus, the IRO and its member states unintentionally “set in motion a harsh Darwinian resettlement calculus that victimized those who had suffered most and rewarded those among the displaced persons populations who had suffered least” (358). The former were the Jews, who were left behind due to selective professional criteria and unofficial anti-Semitism. Deprived of other resettlement options, Jews increasingly turned to illegal immigration to Palestine, regardless of Britain’s determined efforts to prevent it.

Jewish DPs were a critical factor in the First Arab-Israeli War. Over 20,000 DPs took part in it and “tens of thousands of displaced Jews ... were resettled in dwellings that were vacant because 750,000 Palestinians had been displaced during the ... war” (406).

Truman signed the Displaced Persons Act on 25 June 1948. Its 1950 amended version brought an end to DP camps. In the context of the Cold War, however, an impression was left that the United States turned a blind eye on suspected war criminals and Nazi collaborators, while restricting anyone with alleged Communist sympathies.

The book has its weaknesses. It is too preoccupied with the United States and its internal disputes, as compared to debates among all other states and international organizations. Nasaw gives a detailed account of the link between Jewish DPs and the transition from the British Mandate for Palestine to the State of Israel, but has far less to say about the connection between the resettlement of Jewish DPs in Israel and the Palestinian exodus. Finally, the sizeable “hard-core” of “the elderly, the lame, the incurably ill and invalid left behind” (546) deserved more attention.

These few shortcomings aside, David Nasaw’s masterly control of relevant primary sources enables him to reconstruct events within their broader context, showing the ties between big history and personal and family stories. A perfect balance of scientific accuracy and emotional resonance makes *The Last Million* informative and inspirational reading for scholars and non-specialist readers alike.