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'Help the People to Help Themselves': UNRRA Relief Workers and European Displaced Persons

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This article aims to explore the practices relief workers employed in their efforts to rehabilitate refugees in postwar Europe. It argues that the objectives and methods UNRRA's officers adopted to manage the phenomenon of mass displacement drew on a longer tradition of humanitarianism. Furthermore, these methods took shape as a result of the different ways staff in the field interpreted the organization's mandate. The article looks at UNRRA's aspirations to transform international relief into a modern profession, and analyses the obstacles that stood in the way of this endeavour. Particular attention is given to forms of assistance and entertainment organized in the camps. Aspects such as these provide strong evidence of the emergence of a construct that tended to represent relief workers as 'rescuers' and displaced persons as 'recipients'. One striking feature of this emerging construct was that refugees came to be labelled as apathetic and unable to assume a role in society. The article attempts to shed light on the complex nature of the rehabilitation activities carried out in European Displaced Person (DP) camps in the hope of tracing the historical pathway taken by transnational humanitarian action.

Keywords: humanitarianism, displaced persons, rehabilitation, professionalization

Introduction

Between 1944 and 1947 thousands of women and men were actively engaged in Europe for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), which had 'responsibility for alleviating the suffering and misery' occasioned by Nazi occupation. In the words of Roosevelt, providing relief and help in rehabilitating the victims of German 'barbarism' was the first step towards 'put[ting] into practical effect' the United Nations' 'common determination to build for the future a world of decency and security and, above all, peace'.[1] At its peak in 1946 the UNRRA staff in Europe numbered some

6,000 men and 5,000 women; more than half of them were engaged in the Displaced Persons Operations in Austria, Italy and Germany—with the largest contingent assigned to Germany. Organized in small teams, they ran hundreds of assembly centres and assisted millions of displaced persons (DPs), the 'homeless humanity' at the centre of the postwar emergency. DP camps also represented a kind of testing ground on which to create an international corps for humanitarianism. As one former staff member recalled in her memoirs, UNRRA officers were requested to act as 'volunteers [who] no longer consider[ed] themselves as nationals of their homeland but as internationals responsible for the saving of the lost and abandoned' (Louchheim 1985: 696). In spite of this clear ambition to internationalism, two thirds of UNRRA personnel on the ground hailed from English speaking countries, due to the leading role the United States and United Kingdom played inside the organization (Woodbridge 1950, vol. III: 415).

How did relief officers 'put into practical effect' UNRRA's mission? What could the terms 'relief' and to 'rehabilitate' European displaced persons mean to them? To what extent did their work write a chapter in the history of twentieth-century humanitarianism? This article argues that while the organization was clearly expected to implement the UNRRA Council's directives on repatriation, in the areas of relief and rehabilitation UNRRA's mandate remained unclear. The organization also had rather vague notions of what kind of skills relief workers were supposed to have. The lack of a harmonized selection and training process ultimately led to an uneven performance by UNRRA officers in the field, because personnel recruited had different backgrounds, work experience and motivations. All this calls into question the idea that UNRRA was an organization that firmly pursued the process of professionalizing humanitarianism. Undoubtedly the professionalization of international relief work was among the priorities of the organization that paved the way to the UN system. However, during the recruitment process UNRRA largely disregarded the question of standard qualifications, training was improvized, and there was little agreement on goals and outcomes. Relief workers' different convictions, as well as the methods they employed, gave rise to an assortment of re/interpretations of what rehabilitating a refugee was supposed to be. In many cases different interpretations of the rehabilitation mission found a lowest common denominator in the performance of activities that everyone could easily agree on because they drew on Western culture and experience which fuelled humanitarian practices: forms of assistance and entertainment organized in the camps offer telling examples in this regard.

Not only does the prevalence of an assortment of (re)interpretations among staff cast doubt on the idea that the UNRRA personnel formed a consistent professional corps. It also suggests that a construct was in the process of emerging in which relief workers came to see DPs as recipients and themselves as rescuers. This process blended old prejudices against people in need with new suspicions against displaced persons, and essentialized the difference

between those who needed assistance, and those who gave it. While UNRRA officers harboured an incongruous and contradictory mix of convictions, they somehow shared the common perception—one which they articulated in different ways—that 'recipients' were intrinsically passive and apathetic. By contrast, the 'rescuers' made much of the fortitude and devotion they saw as being essential to their own role. The emphasis on innate qualities needed for international relief work ambiguously coexisted with the reference to acquired professional qualifications, which were widely evoked but lacked a standard definition. Undoubtedly it was 'in the Europe emerging from World War II, that certain key techniques for managing mass displacements of people first became standardized and then globalized' (Malkki 1995: 497), and the United Nations' first agency played a leading part in this process, emerging as a 'prominent humanitarian actor' (Cohen 2008: 439). In spite of the fact that UNRRA assumed centre stage, overshadowing the voluntary societies, a look at relief workers' practices shows that the standardization and globalization of 'key techniques' drew on a long tradition of humanitarianism. They were not merely imposed from above by UNRRA and they took shape through varied interpretations in the field of the organization's mandate. Approached from this angle, the post-war administration of displaced persons offers meaningful glimpses into the complex and uneven historical path of transnational humanitarian action (Gatrell 2011: 8–9). The article develops these points drawing on UNRRA's archival material, relief workers' oral testimonies and published or unpublished memoirs.

Relieving DPs: a New Profession?

'To Make Sacrifice for Principles'

In his history of UNRRA, Woodbridge states:

> The effectiveness of UNRRA, a large and hastily created organization without long established policies and procedures and without clearly defined areas of operation, depended primarily on the effectiveness of its staff... [The staff] gave life and reality to the principles and the objectives laid down by the member nations to the Council (1950, vol. I: 236).

In Woodbridge's view the personnel were supposed to make up for the organization's lack of clearly defined strategies and objectives and give 'life and reality' to the motto that was printed in thousands of leaflets: 'help the people to help themselves'. Woodbridge was not only referring to the key staff employed at the Headquarters in Washington or at the European Regional Office in London. His chapter on 'Personnel' is mainly devoted to the thousands of employees who were working in the field, many of them engaged in Displaced Persons Operations. DP relief and rehabilitation was the most prominent challenge of what UNRRA officer Nils Melin termed the United Nations' 'gigantic humanitarian crusade'.[2]

Who were UNRRA 'crusaders' supposed to be? The recruitment programme drafted in early 1944 called for relief officers to be professional social workers with educational qualifications and adequate work experience and consequently the selection of personnel—both in the United States and in Europe—was organized along these lines.[3] In order to provide relief workers with adequate knowledge of the field of operation, additional short-term training courses were organized in the USA, UK and France.[4] Lectures dealt with the history, culture and language of the officers' destination country, while almost nothing was taught about the DPs' countries of origin. This kind of training for personnel in charge of administering DPs reinforced the common attitude that the DPs' flight represented the starting point in their lives and that their identities were shaped only by the time they spent in camps. Generally speaking, information and guidance given to personnel on how to provide adequate relief were very poor. The managers of the education programme in France admitted that training remained 'vague, tentative and theoretical',[5] while in the critical opinion of one of the trainees 'the confusion and incompetence [was] too awful for anything'.[6] Kathryn Hulme—first deputy director and later director of several assembly centres in Germany—described her two-month course on field planning and operation as a sequence of 'lectures about displaced persons given by people who had never seen one' (Hulme 1966: 155). Hulme had no specific qualifications: she had studied science and journalism, travelled extensively and done very different jobs (from freelance journalist to welder in a shipyard). Although she didn't have relevant experience in relief work, the training seemed to her just the annoying delay of the departure for the field. Susan Pettiss—with a Master's degree in Social Work from Columbia University and several years' experience in public welfare—came to even more drastic conclusions. She stated that the most useful information she picked up during the training 'was how to dispense meal or travel tickets to refugees loaded down with baggage in both arms. (You put the ticket in their mouth.)' (Pettiss 2004: 7).

'Vagueness' and 'confusion' in the training activities was a reflection of uncertainty about what kind of skills and expertise were required to accomplish the agency's mission. The first problem was the lack of 'an international common denominator in qualification standards'.[7] In particular, the British and Americans had conflicting views that were the outcome of the different ways social work had developed in the two countries (Woodroofe 1962; Lubove 1965; Leighninger 1987). UNRRA official Harry Greenstein, whose duties were specifically focused on implementing welfare activities, expressed an opinion which resonated among his compatriots:

> in the United States we think in terms of a professional knowledge, of people who are trained especially along the lines of administration, the building of programs, and definite concepts of welfare services... Men and women recruited in Britain have often been people with a great desire to be helpful to other people, but not people necessarily with any background for doing the job.[8]

American critics tended to blame British 'ambitions of a "Lady Bountiful"', while 'men and women recruited in Britain' complained of the 'impersonal' approach of Americans. British Quaker relief officer Francesca Wilson described the Americans' 'touch' with refugees as being 'less intimate'; 'many of their schemes were excellent on paper, but sometimes they seemed to hesitate about trying them out themselves in the rough-and-tumble of the field and prefer supervising those who did' (Wilson 1947: 28). These remarks carry particular weight in view of Wilson's remarkable career in assisting refugees and organizing relief around the world; for example during the great famine in Russia she had worked for the American Relief Administration. The British welfare officer Rhoda Bickerdike gave a less professional assessment of the issue. She had worked for a number of voluntary agencies during the war, in spite of the fact that social work was 'not her thing at all'. Later she applied for UNRRA because she 'had nothing in view'.[9] In her memoirs Bickerdike described the approach of her US colleagues rather bluntly: 'Americans didn't do the work they just told how it had to be done'.[10] The rift between European and American relief workers was aggravated by the fact that Americans hadn't experienced the war within their own country, while the French and the British tended to believe that 'only people who [had] suffered in the same way [could] appreciate the sufferings of displaced persons'.[11] In their view, empathy with the recipients mattered, apart from any professional skill. Relief officer Muriel Gardner—a former civil servant who had previously dealt with welfare only from behind her desk—expressed this belief in rather naïve terms. According to Gardner, in the face of people who had suffered persecution, deportation and enslavement, one just had 'to show a friendly face'.[12] However, relief officers' emotional interest in refugees' afflictions didn't necessarily mean they were available to hear their personal stories and past experiences: Gardner admitted that she did not have the time to listen to DPs' accounts about the war years because 'there was so much to do' in the assembly centre. Both the American 'professionals' and the British 'Ladies Bountiful' contributed to that very process of refugee depersonalization which has been identified as a feature of contemporary humanitarian programmes (Harrell-Bond 1999), but which underwent a significant laboratory test in the administration of DPs in the camps after the war.

Conflicting views over the abilities required to deal with displaced persons were not only the product of the tensions between different national approaches to social work; the call for professionalism was, by and large, intermingled with the idea that the UNRRA humanitarian mission entailed a special vocation, a 'sacred flame' burning inside men and women wearing the organization's uniform. In January 1944 the Personnel Committee asked for people 'willing to make sacrifices for [the agency's] principles and serve as guardians of the humanitarian precepts'.[13] This call is echoed in the way employees described their own duties: UNRRA officials, team directors and welfare officers of every nationality often referred to the qualities of

sensitivity and 'human interest', to enthusiasm and commitment, to the sense of sacrifice and the tact which the personnel taking care of DPs had to be endowed with. Why did this depiction of the qualities needed to provide relief recur so often? The unprecedented magnitude of the devastation in Europe proved to be a pressing and appalling test for those implementing UNRRA's mandate. In the face of massive displacement of millions, dismayed officials came to doubt the reliability of professional methods and techniques, notwithstanding the great importance the agency's planners gave to them. The call for a natural aptitude for relief work, based on a spirit of sacrifice and motivation, re-emerged as a crucial asset; it was a reflection of the old tradition of benevolence that had been eclipsed by the transition to professional social workers, a tradition that was still resilient in the US, even though professionalization had taken place there at a faster pace (Kunzel 1993: 3).

'A Certain Esprit de Corps'

Despite the fact that successful accomplishment of the UNRRA mission depended on the personnel, the organization failed to come up with a set of requirements for the new profession of international relief worker. In attempting to draw up a professional profile UNRRA struggled to strike a balance between skills and temperament, education and motivation, records of service and humanitarian vocation. Meeting such uncertain and ambiguous prerequisites turned out to be extremely difficult. UNRRA staff were not made up entirely of professional social workers, although the recruitment scheme identified these as the ideal type of officer. Social workers constituted the core of the personnel who were selected in the US and then shipped to the European Assembly Centres, and several social workers' professional organizations supported UNRRA's relief programmes (Leighninger 1987: 116). Many men and women who left for Europe had educational qualifications and a good record of service with the Department of Social Welfare, but they had never dealt with displacement. British staff were more heterogeneous. The Welfare Division in London organized the selection of personnel according to high standards and standardized procedure, but social workers were in great demand and the policy had to be revised (Kinnear 2004: 161). Many of those recruited in the UK—particularly women—came from different backgrounds but had experience of relief work during the war years as civil servants or on behalf of voluntary agencies.[14] For Europeans, the war itself had proven to be a massive trial run for the 'expertise' required in the postwar period. In fact, many of the French wearing the UNRRA shoulder flash had assisted refugees and persecuted people while working together with the anti-Nazi resistance.[15]

Moreover, some of the women recruited in Europe, particularly in the UK, had already acquired experience assisting uprooted people during the interwar period as well, while working for various voluntary agencies. Wilson, who had worked many years for the Quakers (Wilson 1944), was not

exceptional. Klemmé, who served in different camps in Germany, described 'quite a few idealists' who before the war 'had been identified with such humanitarian organizations as the Red Cross, Quakers, International Volunteers for Peace and such like' (1949: 34). American social workers had been trained during the New Deal, which had speeded up the professionalization process. Now under the UNRRA flag they stood shoulder to shoulder with the former personnel of charity organizations, with former wartime volunteers and with relief workers who had already practised international humanitarianism. Aleta Brownlee noted that American social workers shared the same 'idealistic conviction'. These people believed that through their engagement in the international field, they 'were making history which [they] had experienced during the Depression'.[16] Many American welfare professionals wore UNRRA's uniform because they advocated the planning of postwar international relief as a global New Deal (Borgwardt 2005: 116–118). Brownlee was a consultant for the US Children's Bureau when she was given the opportunity to work in liberated Europe: to her UNRRA 'seemed to be something new and hopeful'. Over time she became aware of the organization's failings; however, she felt that all the professional social workers still shared that hope, which fuelled their 'team spirit'.[17]

Not all the staff dealing with displaced persons were skilled or committed. The *Rapport sur la partie morale et psychologique de la Section Personnel* contained a description of three 'subgroups' of women and men selected for the French zone of Germany which could well apply to the whole United Nations personnel employed in occupied Europe. Alongside those who were committed and/or qualified, there were 'people who showed up at the recruitment service barely hiding their wish to leave', and above all, 'those who were ready to do anything to earn their living'.[18] Hundreds of refugee camps in the heart of Europe were the ground zero of the humanitarian crisis, but UNRRA intervention meant that these places were also possible sources of employment; in the immediate aftermath of the war they attracted people who had neither commitment nor qualifications, people who were just looking for a job.

Most of them came from the disbanded Allied armies: discharged soldiers and officers who proceeded to swell UNRRA's ranks. The Director of the Training Programme was Frank Munk, a Czech refugee, economist and professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Munk was very puzzled by the possible conversion of 'a soldier, strongly imbued with nationalism, into a good international civil servant'[19]; other Team Directors blamed former soldiers and officers for their intolerance and fanatic insistence on military discipline. The massive recruitment of personnel (particularly between winter and spring 1945) and the need of national governments to soften the impact of army disbandment brought many men into the Assembly Centres who were far from sharing the principles and objectives of UNRRA planners. Klemmé had spent the war years as a recruiter with the US Marines and became a member of UNRRA 'more or less through accident'. He

viewed the 'idealism' of the organization's 'founding fathers' with disdain and sarcasm and regretted that the training of relief officers was not administered by the army. In Klemmé's opinion, military supervision would have turned the useless 'indoctrination to idealism' into helpful instruction (Klemmé 1949: 10–14).

According to Theodore Feder, a former American soldier who served UNRRA in 1945 and then moved to the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), 'what was important for UNRRA at that time was to have a cadre of people who knew the Army, and you had to talk militarized, old buddy sort of thing'.[20] The military forces and at least a part of UNRRA's personnel spoke the same kind of language, despite accounts written by UNRRA relief officers which emphasized their sensitivity, their human understanding of displaced persons and their sympathy for them, in contrast to the Army's insensitivity, dullness and reverence for bureaucracy. Kathryn Hulme's autobiographical novel *The Wild Place* offers many examples in this vein (Hulme 1954). In spite of (perhaps because of) their lack of common background and knowledge, relief officers sought to shape a common 'humanitarian narrative' for their work, one which contrasted starkly with military behaviour. The presence of former military personnel among the ranks of UNRRA is, nonetheless, a good reason to delve deeper into the connections between relief viewed as a military problem, and humanitarianism. These connections have been observed in the rise of the Red Cross (Hutchinson 1996), and have possibly affected how the international administration of displacement has evolved (Malkki 1995).

UNRRA's planners aimed 'to impart a certain *esprit de corps*' that drew on the organization's principles, objectives and ideals. Standing in the way of this goal were the plethora of different motivations and backgrounds of the personnel employed in the field. This variety affected how the duties of UNRRA were interpreted, and it invites us to make a nuanced reading of the role attributed to the agency in shaping the 'international consciousness' of social work (Hollis and Taylor 1951: 37), and therefore in bringing into being the profession of international humanitarianism. An analysis of welfare activities carried out in the Assembly Centres can help us to illustrate this point.

Welfare and its Recipients

'There is No Welfare Here'

Most of the thinking and specific planning which led to the formation of UNRRA had centred around the control and allocation of the actual supplies which would be needed by the civilian populations of the countries of Europe upon their liberation. According to the history of the Welfare Division compiled in 1947, many of these early planners saw 'relief' merely as 'material assistance to persons unable to provide for themselves' and this concept of 'relief' was synonymous with their definition of 'welfare'.[21] Their entire

emphasis was placed on the provision of essential supplies 'to feed the hungry and clothe the naked'.[22] But for another group of people—those inspired by the ideology and policies of the New Deal—the term 'welfare' meant more than the relief of immediate physical necessities: they claimed that it referred 'to services for the personal rehabilitation of individuals requiring special help'.[23] Their position eventually prevailed at the First Council Session (Atlantic City, November–December 1943), although the term rehabilitation 'had no definition' yet, as Dean Acheson later admitted. 'UNRRA', he stated, 'would have done its work and passed away before we were to know what "rehabilitation" really required from us' (Borgwardt 2005: 119). The famous motto 'help the people to help themselves' was supposed to summarize the programme of rehabilitation that UNRRA aimed at carrying out, but beyond it remained vagueness and ambiguity.

In the Assembly Centres of occupied Europe controversy also surrounded the interpretation of UNRRA's three keywords: relief, rehabilitation and welfare. This was probably a consequence of the fact that there existed little agreement at Headquarters on what a shared international welfare plan should be, together with the varied interpretations of Welfare Officers and Team Directors. Although some of them stated clearly that welfare followed immediate relief and that it implied the shift away from aid to rehabilitation, others were hard put to figure out what the first steps should be along the DP's path to rehabilitation. They adjusted their sight according to their own 'flexibility' and 'creativity' (the talents so highly appreciated among relief workers), or they simply admitted to being confused and dismayed. Pettiss, for example, was overwhelmed and discouraged by the reception of thousands of refugees in 24 hours (2004: 56–57), while at the end of a day spent registering DPs and filling out papers Bickerdike noted: 'today I felt it really wasn't worth it. I can't do any Welfare'.[24] This sense of powerlessness grew greater in proportion to the extremity of the violence the displaced persons had survived. In the face of holocaust survivors it could turn into a feeling of utter futility. Katie Louchheim described the feeling in her memoirs published 40 years after the war. Louchheim joined UNRRA after serving the Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operation of the US State Department. She was mainly in charge of public information and travelled extensively from camp to camp. Remembering her conversation with relief workers who were caring for the survivors, she wrote: 'How can one absorb both the horror and the rescue squads? [...] What shall we do about that distressed young mother? No one knows, we go back and forth with the subject' (Louchheim 1985: 705).

Confusion and dismay were also engendered by the priorities set by the UNRRA Council. Repatriation was the one goal the Council insisted on (Reinisch 2008; Shephard 2010: 203–228) and 'however unrealistic the field workers may have thought it, the Administration was bound to honor its instructions' (Woodbridge 1950, vol. II: 513). After almost 30 years, the operations to repatriate DPs were still at the core of Louchheim's

testimony.[25] Repatriation was considered to be a welfare activity[26] and it implied both organizing the departure of the DPs, and persuading them to depart. The logistical arrangements for the return of displaced persons to their place of origin absorbed much of UNRRA's staff energies. The Irish welfare officer Nora O'Connor had already had a taste of how crowded assembly centres were administered during the war, when she was introduced to social work and was employed as deputy commandant at the South London internment camps for aliens. In her memoirs O'Connor stressed the 'considerable trouble' she had gone through in arranging the departure of hundreds of Soviet citizens, and particularly in 'ensuring that the children would have a supply of milk for the journey'.[27] However, to many of her colleagues the operations of repatriation seemed to have little to do with 'welfare', particularly if the term was taken to mean the 'individual rehabilitation' of refugees. Conversely, when taking part in the operations of repatriation some of the relief workers felt they were caught in a system beyond their control. Commenting on the ordinances covering the return of displaced persons, Hulme wrote: 'the UNRRA and Army directives that filtered down to us often made us wonder if anyone around those top-level round tables had ever seen a DP'. She concluded that policy at Headquarters had turned people into numbers: 'Our repatriation statistics were regarded as a sort of scoreboard to be compared with the records of other repatriating camps. The outfits that fell behind were accused of anti-repatriation sentiments' (Hulme 1954: 44).

Hulme made this criticism some years after the organization had ceased its activities, when it was easier to dissociate herself from it; however, perplexity or even unease felt by relief officers in the face of massive repatriation kept emerging in different ways. The main concern was why and how to persuade the DPs to leave. All the schemes for working with displaced persons were judged in terms of their probable effect on repatriation, but the criteria for this varied. Some officers agreed with the military authorities—who accused UNRRA of making the DPs' life too comfortable—and thought that people would be willing to repatriate only when conditions in the camps were clearly worse than conditions in the home countries. Others maintained that only after the refugees had recovered, physically and psychologically, would they feel strong enough for the difficult life that awaited them in their place of origin. Some people felt that vocational training aided the cause of repatriation by giving an individual a means of livelihood, while others were convinced that such activities made it less likely the trainees would repatriate (Woodbridge 1950, vol. II: 514). In addition, some UNRRA officers wondered whether it was really welfare to use any means available in order to push DPs to return, such as enticing them with the promise of extra supplies, segregating national groups, or removing anti-repatriation leaders from the camps. After describing all the repatriation schemes that were being carried out in the Wildflecken camp, Bickerdike concluded sarcastically: 'I shall feel fitted for nothing but Prison Welfare Work after this'.[28] Within

the assembly centres the official policy was implemented to varying degrees and Woodbridge admitted: 'There is no doubt that some UNRRA officials placed more emphasis on pushing repatriation than did others.... It's quite impossible to assess the effectiveness and sincerity of the work of the Administration and its officials' (Woodbridge 1950, vol. II: 518).

Repatriation was the priority, but within the camps welfare expanded to a range of activities, particularly when the departure flows started to dry up. Entries under the title 'welfare' varied from team to team and usually included housing, feeding, clothing and education; very often employment, vocational training (for male DPs) as well as handwork classes (for female DPs). This wide range of activities was administered by female officers. The positions held in the field were mainly divided along gender lines: most of the welfare officers were women, while the majority of the camp directors were men.[29] Recreation and entertainment were also considered part of welfare and they might include weddings, theatre, scouting, sports and above all religion: 'Today my Welfare was two Church services', wrote Bickerdike in July 1945. The establishment of UNRRA gave significant impetus to the secularization of relief work (Cohen 2008: 4) and almost no officer in the organization gave faith as one of the reasons for their commitment, although most deemed religion to be an asset for DPs themselves in their rehabilitation process. Counselling and casework appeared more rarely among the activities listed in the Team's narrative reports, in spite of the recommendations contained in the UNRRA Welfare Guide[30] which reflected the domination of the casework model from American social work (Ehrenreich 1985). UNRRA relief officers were supposed to supervise canteens and food distribution, but they also organized Christmas markets, sewing courses or English classes, negotiating within the guidelines of the organization between the DPs' demands and their own convictions about the rehabilitative process.

Recreation as Rehabilitation

As has been stated, employment was largely seen as decisive for the 'rebirth' of refugees as 'normal human beings' (Salvatici 2011). In spite of their apparently ephemeral character, recreation and entertainment were also regarded as crucial activities for the DPs' rehabilitative process. In the opinion of the Director of UNRRA Team 246, for example, the Theatre Hall offered a privileged angle from which to judge the progress of the rehabilitation programme carried out in the Lyssenko camp:

> Our first poor performances were attended by a not-too-clean, unruly, noisy crowd without consideration for the actors or their fellow-listener. Little by little we saw this change. A booking office opened, shows improved, scenery and behaviour became the rule, there were no more fights for seats or to try and gain admission in the middle of a song or a dance. The aspect of the audience also changed. Men came clean shaven and with collars and ties, women put on

> their best dresses—so that in the end one could have imagined oneself in a small suburban theatre.[31]

Recreation was not meant to be pure entertainment, but re-education to the appropriate behaviour for entertainment. All leisure activities aimed to rehabilitate DPs, to help them recover from a 'low mental status' and 'deep apathy' which were thought to lead to negligence and antisocial behaviour (Bakis 1955). The 'diagnosis' of displaced persons as apathetic and careless served to confirm the old prejudice that blamed recipients for their passivity. UNRRA personnel did, however, consider DPs' apathy to be a consequence of their life in the camps and of having been uprooted. Hence, specific forms of entertainment seemed particularly helpful to 'treat' it.

In February 1946 the Director, the Principal Welfare Officer and the Assistant Welfare Officer of UNRRA Team 146, based in Oldenburg, welcomed the celebration of the Lithuanian National Festival and the anniversary of the Estonian Republic, and helped organize concerts, religious ceremonies, and dances. As they stated in their monthly report to the Area Supervising Officer, the events were 'shared by adults and children alike' in 'a spirit of enthusiastic cooperation between all'; the people who wrote the report did not doubt their importance 'from the welfare point of view'.[32] Undoubtedly this encouragement to celebrate national holidays stemmed from the fact that the DPs were being administered along national lines. UNRRA Headquarters had decided on this policy for political reasons, the foremost being to encourage repatriation (Reinisch 2008). However, officials' approach to relief was more profoundly informed by nationalist ideals (Zahra 2011), and the role of patriotism as an effective counteraction against the 'deep apathy' engendered by uprootedness is meaningful in itself. Officers who were in charge of the UNRRA rehabilitation mission saw the fuelling of DP nationalism as a prompt remedy to the organization's lack of efficiency and clear objectives. Moreover, relief officers already knew that reinvigorating a sense of national belonging through celebrations and leisure activities could have consoling effects: when organizing parties, they did not neglect the national holidays of their own countries and celebrated US Independence Day on the 4th of July or the French Bastille Day on the 14th of the same month.

In a wider sense, the confidence that officials had in the therapeutic effects of nurturing national identities was an expression of their own inability to 'think internationally'. One can only wonder whether the Welfare Officer of Team 128 was aiming to overcome the prevailing national sentiment when he launched a new tradition. In November 1945 he organized a party to celebrate UNRRA's second anniversary in Osnabrück.[33] We do not know what music was played, but probably the concert held on the occasion was not a tribute to the DPs' national affections; instead it is rather likely that it honoured the immaterial homeland all the refugees were supposed to belong to. The acknowledgment that UNRRA was offering displaced persons a new

'home'—in terms of shelter and assistance, but also of values and ideals—was probably meant to be reassuring and therefore rehabilitating. Yet, the status of recipients meaningfully conditioned their 'citizenship' within the organization.

Rescuers and Victims

As we have seen, rehabilitation meant that refugees' needs had to be defined, and was inseparable from UNRRA staff's perception of them as recipients, though what the refugees had experienced and how officials represented them often had very little in common (Kushner 2006: 1). The point was not only to shape the definition of the different categories of DPs needing specific support (e.g. expectant mothers, children and in particular unaccompanied children), but also to conceptualize displaced persons as people in need—which meant to label them as recipients (Zetter 1991, 2007). This conceptualization, on the one hand, justified the rehabilitative measures taken in the camps: for example, the assumption of DPs' apathy legitimized the employment programmes (while at the same time the emphasis on employment programmes also reinforced the belief in DPs' tendency to idleness). On the other hand, the conceptualization of DPs as recipients was a necessary corollary to UNRRA officers' self-perception (and self-depiction) as rescuers, and paved the way for the construction of their collective identity.

'After the Shooting Stopped' (Pettiss 2004), in occupied Europe DPs were deemed to be the war's victims *par excellence*. The Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces had defined them as such, and had entitled United Nations displaced persons to protection and care. Beyond the official definitions, relief officers in their diaries, memoirs, and narrative reports often portrayed DPs as people 'who for years had suffered under the most humiliating and exhausting forced labour history has ever recorded',[34] or in more literary language as 'the new kind of debris of modern war' (Hulme 1954: 6). The emphasis usually was on refugees being traumatized, exhausted, unstable and above all unarmed. This sort of description was not only the case for the most extreme experience, the encounter with the holocaust survivors; it recurred on many occasions, and Muriel Gardener's depiction of displaced women who were so frightened and distressed that they burst into tears when the British officer spoke to them, is a telling example.[35] Being viewed as unarmed victims was the premise for the rehabilitation process which the DPs were supposed to go through; most importantly, it was a necessary designation that had to be conferred before they could qualify for rescue. In postwar refugee camps humanitarian officers already experienced the need to justify their engagement by seeing their recipients as pure victims; this need is now a main feature of the international aid system (Rieff 2002: 55–57; Malkki 2010).

In officers' memoirs of the beginning of the UNRRA mission, the description of DPs as unarmed victims was often accompanied by the description of

themselves as heroic rescuers. The perilous journey through German ruins, the challenge of facing the unknown, the quick thinking in emergencies, and self-control in the face of continuous difficulties were narrated in dozens of team histories which the organization required officers to submit at the end of its mandate. In several reports the Team Director referred to officers whose performance had been particularly valuable as 'heroes', such as 'Miss Denise COLLARD, Belgian Principal Welfare, Employment and Education Officer', without whom, according to the Director, 'Lyssenko [camp] would have never become what it was'.[36] The supposed bravery and prowess of UNRRA staff in charge of displacement were glorified even in the official history of the organization, in which it is stated that 'in no operation did the members of the Administration show such individual initiative and, it may justly be said, display such heroism' (Woodbridge 1950, vol. II: 470).

However, this heroic narrative also emerges from officers who were very critical about UNRRA, who blamed the organization's lack of clear objectives, or pointed the finger at its inefficiency, and disapproved of the work of their colleagues. In the opinion of the former British military officer who in August 1947 delivered his three-page memoir to the Office of the Historian, 'UNRRA was intended to be an outstandingly humanitarian institution, but in its administration it displayed as much life and heart as the stuffed tiger of Bengal reposing in the British Museum', while 'workers were enrolled without much regard for their suitability and fitness from the psychological, training and experience angles'. Nevertheless, UNRRA 'muddled through successfully', mainly thanks to the group of people (naturally the writer included himself) who carried out their duties. Given the twofold fight they were engaged in, against the magnitude of their task and the inconsistency of the organization, their heroism could only be doubly great.[37]

In some cases the heroic narratives of UNRRA officers depict the postwar humanitarian mission like a battlefront experience. The Danish nurse Margrethe Claudine Langdon (whose nickname was Pip) emphasized her own bravery in the face of risky enterprises and a variety of enemies. During the war she had taken part in the Resistance against the Nazi occupation. Like most partisan women, she passed messages, hid weapons, and gave shelter to armed male fighters. Immediately after the liberation of Denmark, UNRRA recruited her in the hospital where she was working in Copenhagen. Pip performed her duties in Germany among the DPs the same way she had worked in the Resistance. In her account of the experience, she depicted herself as a courageous fighter, and credited herself with the kind of virile heroism she had missed out on during the war. First, she carried out (probably not singlehanded) the requisition of the Lübeck hospital from the German authorities, her uniform being her only weapon. 'I was in uniform—you got more power when you stood in uniform'. The same sense of power supported her when she moved beds and tables out of private German homes to the DP nursery because 'in your uniform you could say "I want that"'. However, Germans were not the only 'enemies' the valorous Pip had to deal

with. The US Army accused her of black marketeering and she had to prove that the supplies she had collected with the Danish Scouts were intended for DPs. Finally, she reported a robbery of food from the breastfeeding room and the guilty displaced persons threatened her with reprisals; for six months a soldier escorted her when she was in the camp, but she felt she could take care of her own safety: 'Give me a pistol', she asked the representatives of the American Army, 'I can use it!'[38] Pip offered a 'militarized' narrative of humanitarian heroism, and gave an example of possible convergences between the language of the Army and that of the 'Armies of Peace' (Armstrong-Reid and Murray 2008). From this perspective, however, displaced persons tended to be transformed from pure victims into potential enemies.

'Untiring Self-sacrifice' versus Parasitical Idleness

Heroism meant not only fortitude but also tirelessness, while the DPs' exhaustion was often characterized as apathy and idleness. Relief workers described their own hectic days and made much of their hyper-activism. Daily diary entries by Pettiss often begin with expressions such as 'Very busy day', 'Up at six' or 'The day was a legal holiday, but not for us' (Pettiss 2004). Describing her strenuous activities Bickerdike commented: 'Ford Assembly Line system is being followed, but the cogs don't fit'[39]; at the same time she was embarrassed by the social events that were so often organized by UNRRA personnel. Revising her manuscript she noted that it contained 'too many remarks about food and parties'.[40]

The hyper-activism of relief workers not only stood out in contrast to the DPs' inaction; the staff's strenuous efforts were also aimed precisely to counter this passivity. Again, the development of employment programmes was deemed to be crucial in that way. However, rehabilitation was regarded as a more holistic process, since it was believed that apathy and idleness affected all the spheres of displaced behaviour. Uprootedness was considered to be the reason why individuals were unable to play a social role, and women's loss of their sense of maternity was seen as prominent evidence of this. Comments on the weakness of maternal instinct found among DP mothers appeared in UNRRA's reports, and Welfare Officers complained about the bad condition the children were in. Proud of the achievements of the Maternity Centre of the camp in Ladhe (Minden), Miss M. Boverat, Welfare Officer of Team 65, declared that an 'extraordinary improvement [had] been noticed' since 'the babies [were] clean, windows in houses [were] more often open and every day you [could] see mothers pushing prams along the road'. Thanks to the re-education of DP mothers 'the awful impetigo, consequences of dirtiness and lack of care that everybody [knew had] disappeared'.[41]

The 'Baby Show' had the precise aim of encouraging mothers to take better care of their children. It was organized by Miss Flatt, a Welfare Officer held in great esteem by the Director of her Team, who believed that she really had 'the welfare of the people at heart'.[42] During the 'show'

babies were judged on cleanliness and health standards and the three who got the highest score were awarded 'luxury items' (cot covers and toys) that came from London, while all the participants received consolation prizes such as bars of toilet soap or aprons made from scrap material from the camp's Sewing Room.[43] Mothers of the healthiest and cleanest children also received a gift: knitting needles and a reel of cotton, so that in the future they could even better perform their role of care providers. Besides promoting the practical aspects of parenting, UNRRA officials also celebrated motherhood formally. In 1947, on the second Sunday of May, 'Mothers' Day' was held in all the camps under the jurisdiction of Team 256, in the British zone of Germany.[44] The annual holiday, deeply rooted in American tradition, was reinterpreted as part of the 'welfare machinery' operating among the displaced, since it provided entertainment as a way of promoting the vital social role of motherhood.

As Grossmann has convincingly argued, DP women themselves experienced motherhood as a form of rehabilitation (Grossmann 2007: 184–236). However, for the relief workers the main point was *how* DP women were expected to perform that role, in other words, what was the model of maternal care they were supposed to live up to. O'Connor, serving as a Welfare Officer in Gießen, recalled her own indignation at the Polish mothers' reaction against the collective kitchen that had been set up for them in the camp:

> On its opening day my office was besieged by hysterical, threatening women, shaking their fists and yelling that they would break up the kitchen. THEY knew better than UNRRA how to feed their children etc etc. The Deputy Director dealt with them very patiently and calmly (with me seething in the background).[45]

In spite of the recurrent narrative about their apathy, Polish DP mothers showed they had maternal instinct—but it was not the right kind. Relief officers reinterpreted and readjusted the models of maternity that had been forged over time by welfare policies in Western countries (Gordon 1994; Kunzel 1993; Pedersen 1993; Rose 1998). The activities they developed in the European refugee camps would later serve as the basis for United Nations programmes for mothers and children implemented between the late 1940s and 1950s (Morris 2010).

The patience to lead displaced persons along the right path was often regarded as an essential prerequisite for relief workers and a sign of their commitment to the humanitarian mission. Devotion to others was their most important quality and its presence or absence represented an intangible boundary line that demarcated UNRRA personnel from recipients when these were later recruited themselves for relief work. Budget constraints forced the organization to reduce the international staff (Class I), and to rely more extensively on the recruitment from inhabitants within the Assembly Centres (Class II). In spring 1946, the flow of repatriation had fallen off dramatically and it was clear that most of the DPs in the camps

would be remaining for a long time. The shift in UNRRA's personnel policy was discussed at Headquarters and widely commented on by the officers engaged on the ground.

DPs had been working for UNRRA from the very beginning, although they were officially recruited as Class II staff only when their performances were considered more satisfactory. They often had multiple tasks: Hulme's assistant, for example, was at once her interpreter and driver, he organized the distribution of supplies, dealt with the camp's leaders and supervised many other activities (Hulme 1954). While flexibility was a quality that was appreciated among Class I international staff, it was considered an absolute prerequisite for Class II local staff. Moreover, DPs wearing UNRRA flashes often proved to have skills that the 'rescuers' didn't have, skills essential for the administration of the assembly centres. Langdon, for example, recalls that during the selection process she went through in Denmark she performed fairly well in the English and German tests, while she was lucky enough to skip the French test, a language she did not speak at all. Once in Germany in the service of UNRRA she relied on her Latvian assistant, who could speak 'all the languages'; before Langdon left, her assistant had also learnt Danish. However, salaries, promotions, leave and benefits were very different for the two 'classes', a fact which emphasized their asymmetrical status. Brownlee remembered that the local staff 'worked hard and really cared about their jobs', but 'they were paid appallingly low wages for what they did'.[46] In June 1946, Zone Director J. H. Whiting criticized the fact that Class II staff were not entitled to 'PX privileges' and considered these to be 'essential [...] in order for employment with UNRRA to be attractive'.[47] This refers to limited access to military stores—symbolically very powerful, since it represented a boundary line which divided DPs recruited locally from the international staff.

The ambiguous status of Class II personnel affected UNRRA officers' perception of them. Officers might either appreciate or criticize the services of UNRRA personnel recruited from within the camps, but they continued to see them mainly as displaced persons and not as colleagues. Hulme's autobiographical novel offers a meaningful example. After giving an account of the various kinds of theft that occurred in the camp, she described herself as the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, and the DPs as her 'twelve thousand children' (Hulme 1954: 90). Infantilization of recipients is recurrent in humanitarian operations (Clark-Kazak 2009; Malkki 2010), and in this case it was helpful to protect their identity as pure victims since they were menaced by the allegations of ongoing theft. Hulme's description of her assistant Ignatz—she never uses his full name—as a good child (naive and clever, docile and impulsive, faithful and touchy) was in line with the idea of the 'twelve thousand children', and justified her maternalistic behaviour to him.

In the view of UNRRA 'international' officers, one of the main obstacles to the replacement of Class I with Class II staff was the displaced persons' temperament: they were not only childish; as a result of their past experience and present living conditions, they also tended to be selfish and competitive,

to prioritize the meeting of their own needs. As stated in the history report of the Bad Wiessee Training Centre, it was therefore considered 'vital' 'to develop within the displaced persons, individually and collectively [...] a sense of responsibility for and feeling of satisfaction from serving their own people'.[48] The transmission of this 'feeling of satisfaction' from devotion to other people was part of the rehabilitation process, and it might be considered as both the most challenging step towards 'helping the DPs to help themselves', and the final stage of their resurrection. But in thoroughly rehabilitating Class II personnel, in inculcating in them their own sense of 'devotion', the international staff of UNRRA would have denied the reason for their own existence, since the divide between rescuers and recipients would then have dissolved. This is probably why the relationship between classes remained so complex from the administrative and the human standpoint.

Conclusion

In the conclusion to his section on 'The role of UNRRA' in the administration of European displacement, Woodbridge attempted to respond to the criticism raised against the organization: he was aware that public opinion blamed UNRRA for inefficiency and enormous expenses. UNRRA, he explained,

> while anxious for efficiency, also wanted to rehabilitate the individuals in the camps; it wanted to achieve the objective so often and so sincerely expressed by its first Director General—to help the people to help themselves; it didn't want to run the camps, it wanted the residents to run them (Woodbridge 1950, vol. II: 522).

According to Woodbridge, this was the reason why UNRRA operations among the DPs had required huge funds and an enormous workforce. To clarify his point he used a metaphor:

> any mother who has tried knows that, when she first teaches her children how to perform simple household tasks (bed-making, dishwashing, cleaning) it requires far more time to teach the children to do such work and to supervise their doing it than to do the work herself. That was precisely the situation that confronted the Administration (*ibid.*).

Responding to the accusations made against UNRRA, Woodbridge emphasized the distinct and innovative approach the organization was now taking in attempting to rehabilitate the refugees instead of just rescuing them. Yet when it came to depicting the Displaced Persons he harkened back to humanitarianism's conventionalized image of them as recipients: as children, they were deemed to be in the condition of minors and therefore regarded as eligible for assistance, but not entitled to rights.

This contradictory depiction somehow mirrored, consciously or unconsciously, the ambiguities in the development of UNRRA's displaced persons operations. In European assembly centres old and new methods, practices and objectives coexisted, interplayed and mingled. Aspirations to transform international humanitarianism into a modern profession, which meant forging the executive service corps of the new international cooperation programme, clashed with obstacles of a different nature. First, faith in professional skills wavered before the magnitude of the task UNRRA officers were supposed to undertake, a result of the unprecedented violence committed during the war. Second, the varied background of relief officers, both personal and professional, gave rise to incomprehension and tensions, and also hampered a coherent response to the 'DPs emergency'. But most of all, neither Headquarters nor the personnel on the ground were able to work out what it meant in practice to provide for the welfare of the displaced population and to reshape humanitarianism on the international stage. As we have seen, the different ways rehabilitation was implemented illuminate how all these tensions and contradictions shaped the activities carried out in the camps. The most striking features of this process were the labelling of refugees as apathetic and unable to play a social role, and the providing of rehabilitative programmes that were inspired by specific models of society and socialization. From this perspective, the way in which national patriotism continued to manifest itself among both refugees and staff was revealing. It reflected both the policy to administer DPs along national lines, and the strength of the ties still anchoring relief officers to their own national groups, notwithstanding UNRRA's claims of internationalism.

The complex and uneven picture of the activities carried out in European DP camps suggests that we should reconsider the idea, promoted by UNRRA planners and emphasized when the United Nations took over, that international relief during the postwar years was steadily constructed on the basis of professional qualification and training. Undoubtedly, the actions and discourses of UNRRA personnel, engaged mainly in the Displaced Persons Operations, became the blueprint for theories and practices of the 'new humanitarianism' launched by the United Nations. Yet we would do well not to take the narrative of the 1950s at face value; that very narrative held UNRRA staff experience to be a crucial contribution 'in identifying the common core of professional knowledge and skill', considered 'truly universal' (Altmeyer 1955: 84) and therefore applicable on a global scale. In the process, the tangle of contradictions, ambiguities and compromises that marked the postwar performance of international relief also became a silent heritage of humanitarian aid in the following decades. It was precisely in the 1950s and 1960s that the complex experience of postwar reconstruction in Europe contributed to shaping development policies in the Third World (Mazower 2011: 26–27). Scholars have recently argued that we need a more nuanced periodization of the history of contemporary humanitarianism, revising the notion of the war's aftermath as the founding moment of a new era

(Mazower 2009; Moyn 2010); the history of the 'relief and rehabilitation' of displaced persons offers, as we have seen, a powerful contribution in that direction.

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14. See the biographies of Rhoda Bickerdike, Nora O'Connor, Henry Heath and Thomas S. Hall at the Imperial War Museum (IWM), 3277 95/26/1, Mrs Rhoda N. (Nelson) Bickerdike (nee Dawson); 1323 87/14/1, Miss N. O'Connor; 7908 98/25/1, Mr. H. and Mrs. Heath; 67/106/1 T. S. Hall. See also the biography of Greta Fisher at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).
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17. Brownlee, p. 1, pp. 79–80.
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22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
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