

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DB - 20
Refugees and a Refuge
Part I.

Plockstrasse 8
Giessen, Germany
January 14, 1958

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Dear Mr. Rogers:

Just to pep up the quiz program fad at home, here is a ten billion dollar question:

What nation has done the most for refugees during the past 12 months, or for that matter, the past 10 years?

Could it be America, founded by refugees; consecrated again and again through the centuries as a refuge for the freedom-seeking; our McCarran-latticed gates still open a crack to let in quotas of displaced persons, Hungarian revolutionaries, and others? How about Israel, with its 900,000 homeless Arabs? No, the U.N. has done most of the work there. Canada? Australia? Pakistan?

The answer must be the Federal Republic of Germany.

For in the past decade, the Bundesrepublik has admitted about 11,000,000 persons who may be termed refugees. Some go under the name of expellees - from the Polish-occupied territories like Silesia and East Prussia, from the Czech-occupied areas like the Sudetenland. Others are "exiles", Germans who lived in the Ukraine, in the Baltic nations, in Poland proper. Still others are simply Fluchtlinge (refugees) from the Soviet Zone. All may be regarded as refugees in so far as they have sought safety and freedom in West Germany.

Since World War II, the Federal Republic has spent close to \$10,000,000,000 on these refugees - for housing, feeding, clothing, loans, and other forms of aid. (Some of this money was made available to Germany by the European Recovery Program and other agencies)

One might think: well, the war is over, the borders are more or less settled; nobody is getting chased around much anymore in Central Europe, let alone Germany.

Yet, in the past 12 months, over 300,000 refugees have arrived in West Germany from behind the Iron Curtain. Some have come with legal visas; most have slipped into West Berlin across that city's sector frontier; a few have crashed the heavily-guarded frontier between East and West Germany. In 1957, the reception, care, and support of these fugitives has cost the Federal Republic close to half a billion dollars.

Three hundred thousand refugees a year - more than 5,000 a week; villages suddenly depopulated there, others swelled to the bursting point here. The population of the Soviet Zone alone has sunk by 2,000,000 in the past decade. And West Germany? The density here has zoomed to 209 persons per square kilometer - twice that of France, nine times that of America.

Last week, in the space of six days, 5,753 more refugees fled the Soviet Zone to seek asylum in the West. This week it was 5,174. They came from all professions and all age-groups. A few are absolute no-goods - criminal types and agents. Some are mildly undesirable. But the great majority are ordinary decent individuals, proving that it is not only the wicked who "flee when no man pursueth."

They keep on coming from the East; the city charmer, the farmer, the man on the street, the candymaker, the baker, the cop on the beat. One asks, how can this shrunken sponge, the Bundesrepublik, keep on absorbing all this additional substance? What happens to these refugees? Where do they go?

You look around. The streets are crowded with shoppers. The roads are crowded with cars. The houses are jammed. More houses are being built, more streets, more roads. You look up the statistics: Giessen, population, 1938 - 40,000; Giessen, population, 1958 - 63,000 - one third of them refugees. The new streets have new names; refugee names - Sudetenlandstrasse, Danzigerstrasse, Memelerstrasse, Schlesischerstrasse. The refugees are everywhere, on every street, in every profession, at every school. Remarkably, they have been ingested by this already-bulging country.

In fact, the enormous intrusion of refugees has provided the Bundesrepublik with a priceless labor supply. Without it, West Germany's post-war boom could hardly have been attained and maintained.

Some authorities believe it was once the intention of the Soviets to flood the western zones with refugees and thus create a mass of unemployed and malcontents ripe for communism. If so, the policy has floundered. Because in addition to forming a cheap labor supply for West Germany, the continuing exodus of refugees has drained East Germany of an irreplaceable work force.

Seen from the West, the astounding aspect of the refugee influx is the fact that they are so smoothly assimilated into the economy. Yet there is a limit, a saturation point. West Germany already has a population density equal to that of Great Britain, and the pressure is increasing daily through the entry of close to 1,000 refugees a day.

According to some German economists, the boom is leveling off, although they maintain that the possibility of an economic recession is no greater here than elsewhere at this time. Yet the effects of a recession would undoubtedly be sharper. The refugees must be counted as a vital factor in future economic shifts - a boon today and a potential curse tomorrow.

From a political-legal or constitutional point of view, the Federal Republic must grant the refugees admittance and citizenship - whether it wants to or not. For the Bonn Government has always asserted that it is the sole legitimate German government. The East German puppet regime is not officially recognized. Therefore, fugitives from the Soviet Zone and beyond are wholly warranted in their claims on citizenship and government aid in West Germany.

Nevertheless, the seemingly inexorable stream of refugees presents a growing peril of unemployment for the Bundesrepublik. Here in Hesse, where 1,000,000 refugees have swelled the population to 4,500,000, the State Government calls the newcomers a "social time bomb."

Other states, like North Rhine Westphalia, with its swarming Ruhr industrial area, have even greater difficulties finding employment for all its refugees.

As a sidelight on the employment problem, it is interesting to note that of the 1,212,860 persons currently reported unemployed here, approximately 24 per cent are refugees. This tallies neatly with the overall refugee percentage of the population, which is about 25 per cent. In the main refugee states, Bavaria, Lower Saxony, and Schleswig Holstein, some 28 per cent of the unemployed are refugees - a figure which again tallies fairly closely with the overall ratio of refugees to indigenous population.

Taking the Bundesrepublik as a whole, the ratio of unemployed refugees to employed is only one per cent larger than the ratio of indigenous unemployed to employed. In the main refugee states, the ratio is two per cent larger. In other words, as far as jobs go, refugees aren't getting the short end of the stick.

Just the same, the current unemployment high is troubling to Government authorities. While admittedly a large portion are out of work because they are seasonal laborers, the 1 million-plus figure is unexpectedly high. It throws a sharper light on the refugee influx.

Thus for some time, it has been the official and unofficial policy of West Germany to urge Germans in the East to stay put. "Hold out as long as you can," is the tenor of speeches by Chancellor Adenauer, the Minister for All-German Questions, Ernst Lemmer, and others. West German church authorities, union leaders, and educators echo this policy when addressing inhabitants of East Germany.

Another reason for urging potential refugees to remain where they are is this: Posts vacated in the East stand a good chance of being filled by a loyal Communist party member. Recent reports have it that Czechs, Poles, and sometimes Russians have been imported to occupy vacancies in East Germany.

As a Giessen refugee official put it: "Every refugee leaving the Soviet Zone means that another job will be taken over by a Communist. Each refugee means that the Communists come that much closer to our doors. We urge them to stay like soldiers at the outposts. Naturally, this is important not only for Germany, but for the whole West.

Many curiosities have occurred as a result of this mass shift of populations.

Bavarians, for instance, have had to get used to the fact that their historic mortal enemies, the Prussians, have transplanted themselves in the sacred southern soil. Catholic Silesians have descended on Protestant strongholds in Hesse. Baltic sailor families have landed in Baden's Black Forest.

Not all of this has been as smooth as a ready-mix cake. But the amalgamation has had salutary effects. The Bundesrepublik is much more truly representative of the "German nation" than the artificial empires of Wilhelm or Hitler ever were - and they with all their nationalist blatherings.

In the view of the two major churches, this mingling of traditionally antipathetic groups has gone too far. Where Catholics have suddenly arrived in primordial Protestant areas or Protestants in the ancient Catholic citadels - mixed marriages have climbed as much as 25 per cent since the war. One parish in north Germany reported that 50 per cent of its marriages were mixed. This week, the German Catholic bishops issued sharply-worded pastoral messages warning against mixed marriages. Protestant church leaders followed suit a few days after the Catholic announcement.

Still another unusual facet of the refugee assimilation is the amazing ability of these people to adapt themselves to the moods and manners of this new society. Remember, nearly all of them have been living under one or another form of tyranny for the past 25 years. A whole generation has grown up knowing little of the freedoms of speech, religion, press, and political activity. They have been stuffed to the point of stupor with propaganda. Their lives have been so long regulated that one finds it hard to imagine them able to think and act as individuals.

How do they manage to adjust themselves to a new way of life. The answer, in the overwhelming majority of cases, is, very well indeed. With almost incredible energy, they manage to fasten footing here as if it were their lifelong home. Many have been forced to pull stakes twice in the last decade - those ousted once from the Germany beyond the Oder-Neisse boundary, and now obliged to flee from the Germany subordinate to Russia. Always, they move farther west; a strange antithesis to Germany's ancient pioneers who colonized East Europe.

The biggest single item in West Germany's refugee program is housing. Both from the financial aspect, and from the phase of social adjustment, refugee housing is paramount.

The Federal Ministry for Refugees estimates that over 76 per cent of the refugees now living in West Germany are inhabiting normal dwellings. Another 20 per cent are sublessors, while a scant 4 per cent live in less than "normal" circumstances. At the close of 1957, there were approximately 170,000 refugees living in special camps. Hesse, for instance, has 49 such refugee camps with a total capacity of 8,000. Up to now, the Hesse camps alone have cost \$10,000,000 to build and maintain. For those refugees still obliged to live in camps, West Germany is a home without a house, but their number is infinitesimal when compared to former years.

In addition to its camps, Hesse has built 17,000 dwellings for its refugees since the war; at an annual cost of \$5,000,000. Half of this sum for housing is put up by the Federal Government, which pays each state approximately \$500 per admitted refugee.

Here in Giessen, it is hard to credit one's eyes when walking around the outskirts of town; the apartment houses and single family homes seem to rise up miraculously before one, so much new building is there. A good-sized chunk of it is for refugees. Herr Heinz Fernhomberg, the 39-year-old director of Giessen's city refugee office, says that 800 refugees have taken up residence in new homes here during the last 12 months. Another 200 are living in a special housing block, while awaiting transfer to permanent quarters.

Housing is only a fraction of Fernhomberg's job. He must see to it that the city's refugees are properly fed, clothed, and employed. The children must have their school admission arranged. Young girls must be kept off the streets (Giessen police estimate that half of the city's large prostitute population are refugees). The refugee office also takes care of East Germans who come here for a visit. In 1957, Fernhomberg's office aided 17,000 Germans from the East in one way or another.

Looked at from the East German balcony, current aspects of the refugee exodus are not altogether gratifying.

Up to now, a part of the refugee policy of the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (D.D.R.) has been to encourage undesirable elements to move on to West Germany. Thus for years, criminals, old people, unfit workers, and political unreliaables have been "dumped" in the Bundesrepublik. They have been given legitimate D.D.R. exit visas and sometimes permission to take household goods along.

However, it has also been the policy of the Soviet Zone government to restrain population groups who are inexpendable to the economy from leaving. The D.D.R. counts youngsters, skilled workers, technicians, and soldiers in this number.

Vexing it must be for the East German authorities to remark that 52 per cent of the refugees currently leaving their territory are 25 years old or under, that another 26 per cent are aged 25 to 45. Vexing it must be to note that 24 per cent of the refugees are factory workers, another 18 per cent schoolchildren and students, another 2 per cent technicians and engineers. According to West German authorities, these figures bespeak the age and occupation spread in the D.D.R. That is to say, the refugees are coming from all groups in general accordance with the make-up of the Zone's population.

Little wonder then that the D.D.R. has taken harsh measures against the wilful débouche of its most prized citizens.

On December 11, 1957, the East German government instigated new laws against Republikflucht (flight from the republic) - leaving the Zone without legitimate papers. The penalty for fugitives was set at up to three years in prison. Similarly, those aiding and abetting refugees are now subject to prison sentences in the D.D.R.

Close to half the persons fleeing the Zone enter the West via Berlin. From there they are flown out to West Germany. The new Republikflucht stipulates that the "flight" becomes punishable when the refugee leaves Berlin for the West. The D.D.R. has also made the preparation and attempt to flee culpable. In the five weeks since the issuing of this new ordinance, a number of cases of apprehended runaways have been reported. West German authorities look on the desertion law with mixed feelings. One Government authority said: "Republikflucht, ha! It's neither a republic, nor is it desertion." On the other hand, full application of the law is bound to hinder the stream of refugees, which, from an economic aspect, is more or less desirable to the Bundesrepublik.

As if the flight of laborers, students, and technicians weren't enough, the high desertion rate of soldiers in recent years has been even more embarrassing to the D.D.R.

Last year, 3,000 members of East German military units - the Volkspolizei (people's police) and Volksarmee (people's army) - have fled to the West. In 1956 it was 2,170. When one considers that the total number of men under arms in the D.D.R. is 200,000 (the latest estimate) these desertions mean that a sizable bite is being taken out of the standing army. Rank hath no privilege when it comes to desertion. From the lowliest private up to captains and majors, they've come a running to the West - some in full uniform and carrying their weapons.

Ironically, the Volkspolizei and Volksarmee officers are among the favored elements in the East German economy. They get better food and better clothing than most classes of this classless society. Here in the West, they have provided the various intelligence services with a running commentary on the condition of D.D.R. military outfits.

This week, a powerful advertising campaign was begun in the Zone to encourage Volksarmee enlistments - perhaps an indication of the losses suffered through desertion.

In the hard years immediately following the collapse of the Third Reich, Germans called their gigantic refugee problem a tragedy. The word is probably too strong for the situation today. The continuing division of Germany has made the refugee story a daily companion. It carries perils with it, but hardly tragedy.

But what about the future?

It seems certain that the suction power of booming West Germany will remain strong even when the boom decreases to a pop. Moreover, there are still hundreds of thousands of Germans now preparing to move here from other East Block countries - from Poland, Yugoslavia, the Volga, and Czechoslovakia.

The population of West Germany is 51,000,000 and growing gradually. The population of East Germany is 17,000,000 and decreasing gradually. Population density here (209 per square kilometer) compares unfavorably with the density there (154 per square kilometer).

The great questions for the future are: what comes when Germany is reunited? and the corollary, what comes if Germany recovers some of her former territory beyond the Oder-Neisse Line?

Would the millions of refugees who have made their new homes in the Bundesrepublik be willing to go back and start all over again; back to what is now the Soviet Zone, or possibly back to East Prussia or Silesia?

It seems doubtful that the majority would return. Aided by generous Government provisions, and carried forward by their own admirable energies, most of the refugees have struck perdurable roots here. They have their homes, their business, and their friends in the West.

With the exception of the more recent refugees from the Soviet Zone, who still have relatives and possessions in the East, most seem to be settled for good.

I have met very few refugees who would consider going back. As one phrased it, "Returning would mean starting all over again; for that you need pioneers."

Despite the temporary benefits of a cheap labor supply and the healthy mingling of German "tribes", the great drift to the West is basically unsatisfactory. One has the feeling that most Germans realize this. Yet the settled refugees appear almost to have turned their backs on their former homes in the East.

Somehow, this torn nation must find a future means to right the balance. Perhaps one can take comfort from this German proverb:

"They don't all flee who turn their backs."

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Received New York 12/29/58.