

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: THE AFTERMATH OF THE HOLOCAUST

In 1945, when American, British, and Soviet troops entered the concentration camps, they discovered piles of corpses, bones, and human ashes—testimony to Nazi mass murder. Soldiers also found thousands of survivors—Jews and non-Jews—suffering from starvation and disease. For survivors, the prospect of rebuilding their lives was daunting.

After liberation, many Jewish survivors feared returning to their former homes because of the antisemitism (hatred of Jews) that persisted in parts of Europe and the trauma they had suffered. Some who returned home feared for their lives. A number of pogroms, or violent anti-Jewish riots, occurred in postwar Poland, including one in Kielce in 1946 in which Polish rioters killed at least 42 Jews and beat many others.

With few possibilities for emigration, tens of thousands of homeless Holocaust survivors migrated westward to other European territories liberated by the Western Allies. There they were housed in hundreds of refugee centers and displaced persons (DP) camps such as Bergen-Belsen in Germany. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and the occupying armies of the United States, Great Britain, and France administered these camps.

A variety of Jewish agencies worked to assist the Jewish displaced persons. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee provided Holocaust survivors with food and clothing, while the



American chaplain Rabbi Herschel Schacter conducts services for Jewish survivors of the Buchenwald concentration camp shortly after liberation.

Buchenwald, Germany, May 18, 1945.
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT) offered vocational training. Refugees also formed their own organizations, and many labored for the establishment of an independent Jewish state in Palestine.

The largest survivor organization, Sh'erit ha-Pletah (Hebrew for “surviving remnant”), pressed for greater emigration opportunities. Yet opportunities for legal immigration to the United States above the existing quotas were still limited. The British restricted immigration to Palestine. Many borders in Europe were also closed to these homeless people.

The Jewish Brigade Group (a Palestinian Jewish unit of the British army) was formed in late 1944. Together with former partisan fighters displaced in central Europe, the Jewish Brigade Group created the Brihah (Hebrew for “flight” or “escape”), an organization that aimed to facilitate the exodus of Jewish refugees from Europe to Palestine. Jews already living in Palestine organized “illegal” immigration by ship (also known as Aliyah Bet). British authorities intercepted and turned back most of these vessels. In 1947 the British forced the ship *Exodus 1947*, carrying 4,500 Holocaust survivors headed for Palestine, to return to Germany. In most cases, the British detained Jewish refugees who were denied entry into Palestine in detention camps on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus.

With the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948, Jewish displaced persons and refugees began streaming into the new sovereign nation. Possibly as many as 170,000 Jewish displaced persons and refugees had immigrated to Israel by 1953.

In December 1945, President Harry Truman issued a directive that loosened restrictions on the immigration of persons displaced by the Nazi regime. Under this directive, more than 41,000 displaced persons immigrated to the United States; approximately 28,000 were Jews. In 1948, Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act, which provided approximately 400,000 U.S. immigration visas for displaced persons between January 1, 1949, and December 31, 1952. Of the 400,000 displaced persons who entered the United States under the DP Act, approximately 68,000 were Jews.

Other Jewish refugees in Europe emigrated as displaced persons or refugees to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Western Europe, Mexico, South America, and South Africa.

For an interactive version of this article and more historical articles, visit www.ushmm.org/wlc/en.