

# To count or not to count: British politics of framing and the condition of “illegal infiltratee” in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp (1945–1948)

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## Abstract

This article explores the politics of humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of the Second World War, by examining the act of framing certain groups of Jewish refugees as “infiltratees”, in the context of the British occupation zone of Germany, and the Bergen-Belsen DP camp more specifically. Based on archival sources and the available literature, it dissects this legal categorisation to help understand who the different individuals categorised as infiltratees were, the wider political conjuncture that informed this framing, and the real consequences felt by those who were framed as such. This article demonstrates the extent to which the attribution of legal categories to those on the move, with tangible effects for those individuals, represents a deeply politicised practice in Europe, which has been operating at least since the first half of the twentieth century, and which continues today.

## Key Words

Framing, Germany, humanitarian assistance, Jewish refugees, postwar Europe, regimes of legality, state of in-betweenness

## Introduction

### The Jewish census of 29 October 1946 and the politics of counting

In December 1946, Josef Rosensaft, leader of the Jewish Displaced Persons (DPs) of the Bergen-Belsen camp (or Hohne)<sup>1</sup> in the British occupation zone of Germany, wrote a letter to Noah Barou of the World Jewish Congress to complain about a census of the camp’s Jewish population carried out in October by the British military government (Rosensaft 19 December 1946). The British authorities counted 10,535 people, whereas Rosensaft claimed a number of 10,942 registered people and 2,500 unregistered “refugees”. Apart from refugees, elderly people, children and people travelling between camps to visit relatives were also excluded from the count. Rosensaft complains that these “miscalculations” were intentional and aimed to serve the interests of “certain people”

in the military government. In his letter, however, he does not clarify who these people were, nor the political implications of these “miscalculations”. What is clear is that this difference in numbers would have had implications for the assistance people would (or not) receive, since the British authorities sent the results of the census to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Since the end of 1945, the UNRRA was responsible for running the camps in Germany and supplementing food and clothing provided by the occupation governments (Lavsky 2002: 59, 91).

The “refugees” Rosensaft mentioned were not counted because they were not officially registered at the camp and hence could not receive assistance from the UNRRA nor the British authorities. To count as eligible for assistance, one had to possess documents issued by the British military government, confirming one’s registration at Bergen-Belsen as a DP. These refugees corresponded to a group of people often labelled in correspondence and

<sup>1</sup> Hohne was the name given by the British authorities to the Bergen-Belsen DP camp. I choose to use Bergen-Belsen, following the choice of the Jewish DP population (Lavsky 2002: 75).

other post-1945 sources as “infiltrates”. This article focuses on this ‘label’ of infiltrate, as understood by the British authorities after the Second World War in the British zone of Germany. The infiltrates or “illegal infiltrates”<sup>2</sup> were Jewish individuals from Eastern Europe (mostly Poland) who left their homelands, often due to the presence of anti-Semitism in the aftermath of the war. The term infiltrate reveals a condition of being outside the law and performing an action – to infiltrate – which was seen as illegal. This term implies the criminalisation of individuals for entering a space they are not entitled to – in this case, the Jewish DP camps in the British zone.<sup>3</sup> The camps constituted the loci of humanitarian assistance after the war, where DPs were provided with shelter, food, and other basic needs (Cohen 2012: 36). To be denied access to the camps meant to be denied basic assistance. This act of labelling or framing (and thus differentiating) groups of people and the political stakes of this framing are central to this article.

I focus on the concept of infiltrate and its reality effects, to examine British politics of humanitarian assistance between 1945 and 1948 and the binary legitimate–illegitimate, encapsulated in this concept. “Counting” expresses two intertwined meanings: the action of adding up the number of something/someone in a group to find out how many there are; and the idea that if something/someone counts, they are seen as valuable or important and thus entitled to something. The anecdote with which I began this article is particularly representative of the politics of humanitarian assistance through the act of counting. It reveals that the choice of who counts and is counted was determined not only by the human condition of one in need, but also by one’s possession of a legitimate status. This status was conferred by the British occupation authorities according to their criteria, as examined below, and effectuated in the act of registering and providing individuals with documentation. With appropriate documentation, one would be counted in for food rations and other needs. Only those entitled to be included in a census would count, i.e. be entitled to assistance.

## The politics of framing: British postwar policies towards Jewish individuals

Much has been written about the refugee issue after the First and Second World Wars, and about DPs during and after the Second World War. Especially since the 1980s, many authors have focused on the latter (see, for example, Lavsky 2002; Shephard 2010; Cohen 2012). Other categories related to the Second World War included German expellees from Eastern Europe, Prisoners of War (POWs) and internationally displaced Germans (or evac-

uees) (Hilton 2018: 8). Regarding Jews, a 1947 report written by the Advisor on Jewish affairs<sup>4</sup> explains that “various sections of the Jewish population in the British Zone can be regarded as Poles, Hungarians, Rumanians, Germans, etc. or they can be regarded as DPs, Infiltrates, Refugees, Expellees, etc.” (Graham-Smith 1947). What all these and other labels express is, on the one hand, the scale of population movement between 1945 and 1948 (especially in Germany), and on the other, the framing of individuals and, implicitly, their dependence on contemporary occupation (and national) politics.

The British policy towards Jewish (would-be) DPs was characterised by several factors. First, the British authorities were very strict regarding who was entitled to DP status and movement to and from their zone. The British authorities only considered two categories of DPs: victims of the Nazis and Allied partners, and enemy Germans and Nazi collaborators (Lavsky 2002: 52). At the end of 1945, Jews amounted to circa 5 percent of all DPs in Germany, but with time their number increased because of the repatriation of non-Jewish DPs to their homelands and the arrival of thousands of Jews fleeing Eastern Europe (often designated infiltrates). Initially, most Jewish DPs were located in the British zone, but this soon changed since the British were reluctant to admit Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. In December 1945, the British zone closed to newcomers and refused to accept potential DPs, hence many refugees left for the American zone (Kochavi 2001: 31).

At the end of 1945, the British government in London started receiving reports of thousands of Jews from Hungary and Poland who were beginning to ‘infiltrate’ the British occupation zones in Germany and Austria (Kochavi 2001: 43; Cohen 2012: 15). Correspondence between British authorities dated to January 1946 states: “a considerable number of Polish Jewish who have voluntarily left their homes in Poland since the end of hostilities due to alleged anti-Semitic demonstrations are entering Hohne D.P. camp although they are not officially entitled to D.P. status” (Office of the Deputy Military Government 1946). A subsequent letter explains that Polish Jews had been “trickling into the DP Camps at Hohne during the past 4 months at the rate of 30 a day. There are now 9,000 Jews at Hohne, 70% of whom are Poles, and most of whom, apparently, are confident of migrating to Palestine this year” (King 1946). This seems to indicate that there was a connection between the entry of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, the closing of the British zone to newcomers at the peak of these arrivals, and the process of illegalising this group of people – the infiltrates – due to their entry into the British zone illegitimately.

To prevent ‘illegal’ entry, the British introduced an intelligence system to block attempts even before refugees

2 The adjective “illegal” used to qualify the “infiltrates” often appears in the archival sources.

3 It should be noted, however, that the categorisation of “infiltrates” was also applied in the context of the American occupation zone and in the British occupation zone of Austria (and possibly other contexts) (Grossman 2007: 1–2).

4 The name of the Advisor on Jewish affairs is not mentioned in the archival sources.

reached their zone (Lavsky 2002: 54). For this purpose and to control the existing DP population, all occupation authorities carried out censuses, like the one of October 1946. These started in earnest in March 1946, following a resolution of the UNRRA that established that all DPs should be registered in assembly centres (or camps). The initial motivation was to facilitate efforts of repatriation, but once repatriation halted the screening procedures became stricter. In mid-1946, the avowed aim of the Allied occupation authorities and the UNRRA was to get rid of suspicious collaborators, traitors and war criminals, thus allowing the authorities to ‘sanitise’ the DP communities by removing the ‘unworthy’. This selection was also motivated by practical (and less publicised) concerns – the Allied occupation authorities aimed to drastically reduce the number of camp inhabitants (Kochavi 2001: 50).

Another aspect that characterised British postwar policies towards Jewish refugees was their disregard for their “Jewishness”. This meant that the British officials downplayed their necessity to be a part of a Jewish community having lost family and friends during the Holocaust. Whereas the Americans changed their initial non-segregation policy in the DP camps relatively fast, the British only started changing their policy in 1946. According to the British authorities, the reason behind this insistence was to avoid practising racial discrimination like the Nazis did, thus preventing the increase of anti-Semitic feelings (Lavsky 2002: 51–53). Some authors, such as Hagit Lavsky, argue that such policies represented a continued “deep-seated animosity toward the Jews” (2002: 54). According to other authors, however, this view downplays the refugee problem faced by the British military authorities in Germany after 1945, as well as Britain’s difficult position between its obligations towards the Jewish victims of Hitler as well as the Arab majority in Palestine (Herbert 2005: 116).

British policies towards DPs and other categories of Jewish refugees (including infiltrees) were greatly influenced by the economic situation in the UK and British involvement in the Arab region. The war had taken a substantial financial and human toll, which helps understand why the British were eager to lighten their financial burden and solve matters fast. They were also concerned about large-scale emigration to the UK. Their reluctance to allow more Jewish refugees into their zone is thus partly explained by the country’s postwar financial situation (Kochavi 2001: 1; Lavsky 2002: 54). Furthermore, since the late 1930s, British policy revolved around safeguarding the country’s position in the Arab world. When Hitler got to power in Germany, emigration to Palestine increased significantly, causing the alarm of the local Arab population. Pressured by the Arabs and their interests, the British started restricting this movement just as the situation of the Jews in Europe worsened

(Kochavi 2001: 7–10). After the war, it became clear that many Holocaust survivors could or did not want to return to their homelands in Eastern Europe and wished to resettle in Palestine. The British government, however, continued to adhere to the principle that had guided its politics since the late 1930s by maintaining a separation between the issue of the Jews in Europe and the question of Palestine. From the mid-1940s onwards, this became virtually impossible – opposition of the Jewish DPs in Bergen-Belsen led by Rosensaft with the support of Jewish organisations, and concerns of the US regarding the predicament of the Jewish DPs in the British zone led the UK to compromise regarding its policies. Nonetheless, the UK remained steadfast in its guiding principle at least until late 1947, which significantly influenced its policies towards Jewish DPs (Kochavi 2001: 7–10, 59). Although efforts remained limited, the British did not forbid emigration to Palestine altogether. For instance, in 1947 they initiated operation “Grand National”, through which 350 certificates were allocated monthly for Aliyah (transfer to Palestine). However, the limited number of certificates meant that attempts were also made at ‘illegal’ Aliyah (Lavsky 2002: 197–198).

## Dissecting a category of illegality

The infiltrees were far from a homogenous group: correspondence and other contemporary sources and the available literature refer to them several times between 1946 and 1948 in different ways, meaning that probably unrelated individuals, with different reasons for being on the move, were often jumbled together into this category. Furthermore, the word “refugee” seems to have been used interchangeably with “infiltrator” to refer to Jewish people from Eastern Europe fleeing their homeland and trying to enter the Allied occupation zones.<sup>5</sup> Although the infiltrees have been written about (by the British, international Jewish organisations or Rosensaft), it seems like the infiltrees themselves left few or no records. Therefore, and given contemporary politics and shifting conflicts of interest, when considering what is said about the infiltrees, one needs to be wary of who is saying what and with what purpose.

Atina Grossman, writing mostly about the American occupation zone,<sup>6</sup> hints at the lack of homogeneity of those labelled as infiltrees when she explains that they constituted three different yet sometimes overlapping groups. First were survivors of concentration and labour camps and death marches, freed in Germany and returned to their hometowns hoping (often in vain) to find family members or repossess property. The second were Jews who had survived among the partisans, in hiding or concealing their Jewish identity. The third and largest (yet

<sup>5</sup> For the sake of consistency throughout, I will henceforth refer to this group as infiltrees.

<sup>6</sup> A significant amount of the literature available focuses on the American zone, which is probably related to the fact that many more Eastern European Jews chose to go to this zone, due to the stricter policies of the British occupation authorities.

least studied) group “comprised perhaps 200,000 Jews who had been repatriated to Poland from their difficult but life-saving refuge in the Soviet Union and then fled again, from postwar Polish antisemitism” (Grossman 2007: 1–2, 159–162). Anti-Semitic violence culminated in the Kielce pogrom of July 1946 (Cohen 2012: 127), leading to the escalation of the influx of infiltrtees entering Germany (Grossman 2007: 92).

Several reasons are identified to explain the arrival of Polish Jewish infiltrtees in the German occupation zones: the search for safety from the threat of racial violence (one of the most common) (Grossman 2007: 93), economic collapse, the inability to retrieve property left behind, the loss of family members and the grim political and economic forecast (Lavsky 2002: 33). From correspondence dated to December 1946, Rose Henriques (a British Jew who served as Head of the Germany department of the Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad or JCRA) explains that the recently arrived infiltrtees came to Bergen-Belsen in search of Jewish communal life and religious facilities, and of relatives or friends (Henriques 5 December 1946). Possibly the most common motivation for entering the British occupation zone (and connected to the other reasons), however, was the hope to emigrate to Palestine through the DP camps (Lavsky 2002: 33; Shephard 2010: 5). The British authorities refused to accept that these Polish Jews were fleeing the threat of racial persecution, despite their awareness of anti-Semitic violence in Poland (Kochavi 2001: 52). The British were pressured from many sides (the US, the UNRRA, Jewish organisations) to change their policy concerning the infiltrtees, but they remained steadfast, leading to many discussions between different parties (Kochavi 2001: 52–54). For the British, these Jews were leaving Poland out of free will, and therefore were not entitled to assistance.

Behind the British decisions were concerns that infiltrtees would intensify Zionist sentiment amongst DP communities, thus increasing the pressure to grant them permission to emigrate to Palestine (Cohen 2012: 136). Lavsky mentions that the British believed that some of these infiltrtees were even helping the Jewish DPs to organise and, together with Zionist organisations, would pressure the British Mandatory authorities in Palestine to allow them to migrate (Lavsky 2002: 54). The British suspicions, often expressed in contemporary correspondence (Lavsky 2002: 198), had some grounds in reality. As Lavsky explains, especially after the British closed their borders at the end of 1945, Aliyah became a focus of Zionist activity. This was done, for example, by helping the Briha (or escape) into the British zone by smuggling refugees into camps and preparing Jewish people for legal or illegal Aliyah. While most of these activities were

the responsibility of Palestinian and international Jewish organisations, the integration of infiltrtees for a temporary stay in the British zone was mostly the responsibility of Rosensaft and his colleagues. They did so by providing them with falsified documentation and by dealing with welfare organisations and the British authorities (Lavsky 2002: 198). This shows how groups conditioned by the framing of the occupation authorities were able nonetheless to assert their agency by working towards what they believed themselves to be entitled to.

The British occupation authorities were against removing the ‘illegitimate’ refugees from the camps by force. Hence they would enforce the status of illegality upon Eastern European Jews attempting to enter the zone to prevent and dissuade more from doing so, and to encourage the ones already there to leave. Once infiltrtees had “infiltrated” the DP camps, two strategies were planned and in some cases applied: the resettlement of infiltrtees in the British zone into (often non-Jewish) German communities, while treating them in the same way as German refugees;<sup>7</sup> and the enforcement of politics of humanitarian assistance through the act of (not) counting. This assistance was reflected in the provision of food, shelter, health, education and religious services, and being part of Jewish communal life.

Grossman maintains that food politics worked “as important terms through which questions of guilt, victimization, and entitlement were conceptualized – and enforced – in the early postwar years” (2007: 177). I argue that this idea can be extended to the denial of other forms of assistance, visible in post-1945 archival sources referring to what the infiltrtees were *not* entitled to. For instance, a 1946 letter from Rosensaft to Robert Solomon expresses his concerns regarding the British refusal to provide space, food and education to infiltrtees (Rosensaft 31 January 1946). Another example are the minutes of a 1948 conference about the future of the Glynn Hughes Hospital in Bergen-Belsen, that explains: “an entitled patient could only be a Displaced Person eligible for PC/IRO care and maintenance and in possession of a blue D.P. card. [...] Dr. Gottlieb stated that speaking from the point of administration of the hospital he was concerned as to who would pay charges for the infiltrtees” (P.W. & D.P. Division 1948).

## Final thoughts

In this article, I explored British politics of humanitarian assistance at work in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp in the aftermath of the Second World War, by examining the category of the “infiltrtee”. This categorisation should be understood within a “politics of framing” that operated at

<sup>7</sup> We see in contemporary correspondence (namely between members of international and British Jewish organisations, and with British occupation authorities) that this ruling was very controversial and discussed at length for a considerable amount of time. This was seen by members of Jewish organisations as not responding to the needs of Jewish individuals, for instance, to have access to Jewish communal life and religious facilities (see, for example, Henriques 22 October 1946; Solomon 1946; Henriques 5 December 1946; Pink 1947).

this and other camps during this and other periods. For Nancy Fraser, “framing” implies a distinction between members and non-members of particular entities, by establishing boundaries amongst groups of people based on politically-informed criteria (2005: 11). This article shows how, between 1945 and 1948, the conceptualisation of the category of infiltree – and the consequences felt by the individuals who were attributed this category – was deeply motivated by varying and shifting politics. It also demonstrates how the British authorities exerted their power in selecting who did or did not count for humanitarian assistance, by defining the terms of legitimacy vs illegitimacy. Through certain policies, and the use of adjectives such as “bona fide” or “genuine” to qualify the DPs (as opposed to the infiltrees), the British established who was seen as a member and as a non-member of this category, and who was therefore entitled to humanitarian assistance and who was not.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it could be argued that the process of illegalising the infiltrees can also be seen as a consequence of the agency these individuals exerted in challenging the power of the British occupation authorities to establish who counted as “legitimate” and in choosing to enter the occupation zone regardless of British policies.

In this framing process, the British authorities were essentially establishing who counted, that is, who was worthy of empathy and humanitarian assistance. While the Jewish DPs, who were essentially stateless, could receive assistance (including access to food, shelter, education, religious communal life and health services), the Jewish infiltrees, having renounced their nationality by choice (even if out of necessity) – and not fitting into the category of DP as defined by the British – would enter a state of in-betweenness where they could evoke no rights, and thus be granted no humanitarian assistance. The decision of the British authorities to offer no support to the alleged infiltrees was thus an act of framing who did not count.

Such politics of framing and of choosing who does and who does not count for assistance resonates with Europe’s so-called “migration crisis” from 2015 onwards. In this context, the framing of individuals along the categories of “refugee” and of “migrant” has been used to distinguish between those on the move and the legitimacy (or alleged lack thereof) of their claims to international protection and assistance. This framing, based on shifting political agendas (as well as public opinion influenced by news media), has been used in recent years to justify policies of inclusion and exclusion, with important implications for the way in which the individuals on the move are treated, whatever the categories imposed upon them (see, for instance, Goodman et al. 2017; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Examples such as this one, as well as the one addressed in this article, demonstrate the extent to which the attribution of different categories to those on the move

for a variety of reasons, represents a deeply politicised practice in Europe at least since the first half of the twentieth century. By exploring the post-Second World War category of the infiltree, ascribed to individuals better characterised by their state of in-betweenness, I hope to have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of those on the move (whether regarded as legitimate or not), and on the potential real effects of the politics of framing.

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