

Texte de la communication présentée lors du colloque Histoire/Genre/Migration, Paris, mars 2006. Ne pas citer sans accord de l'auteur

## **English government and European Women Refugees after World War II**

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### Introduction

Refugee studies have criticized the preference given to analyses of the refugee phenomenon focusing essentially on the problem of humanitarian disaster, since this eventually devolves into the question of providing assistance, overlooking the original understanding of the necessity to mobilize against the violation of human rights (Malkki 1995). The refugee problem thus undergoes a process of "depoliticization," i.e., a loss of the collective awareness of the extremely profound political, social and cultural reasons underlying the situation. This approach transforms the refugees - and women refugees in particular - into powerless actors, the inevitable result of temporary crises, people seen as having needs rather than rights.

Departing from this perspective, restoring sufficient historical depth to the understanding of the refugee problem in the 20<sup>th</sup> century constitutes a necessary first step in laying bare the loss of political significance and restoring a complexity to the refugee question as it came to be understood through the enforcement of the system of nation states, the advent of two world wars and then the process of decolonization. In this sense, the conjunction between historical analysis and a gender-based approach seems especially useful since the emphasis placed by public discourse on the prevalence of women among the refugee population seems intimately connected to the process of "depoliticization" in discourse about refugees. In other words, a strong interaction emerges between the socio-cultural construction of feminine gender and the figure of the refugee insofar as they are considered non-political subjects, needing merely assistance and protection.

On this basis I propose to pursue a specific focus on the millions of women who at the end of World War II populated the numerous refugee camps of Germany,

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Austria and Italy (countries under Allied occupation), examining two aspects of the situation in particular:

- a) the relationship between the international political situation (beginning with the events and outcomes of the global conflict, then followed by the Cold War) and the most serious refugee crisis experienced in Europe.
- b) the way in which international agencies pursued, at first, a program of return and then a program of resettlement (as constrained by the Cold War).

The specific implications of gender significantly influenced the development of resettlement programs, which in their first attempts saw the English government take on thousands of women refugees from the Baltic countries as sanatorium attendants in the Balt Cygnet Operation (1946-1947).

#### Displaced after World War II

At the end of World War II displaced people throughout the devastated regions of Europe, posed a worrisome threat for the sought-after stability of the new order. Managing the crisis of the displaced people, providing immediate assistance, and finding a long-term solution to the problem became an urgent political issue. The Russell Sage Foundation in New York in an effort to provide the U.N. with useful information for developing an appropriate intervention policy issued a brief publication in 1946 that concluded: "in countries so badly undermined by economic collapse and still so spiritually weakened by the nihilistic influences of Nazism and Fascism, failure to deal constructively with the problem of refugees and displaced persons might well prove fatal to the moral, political and spiritual reconstruction of Europe".<sup>1</sup> The fundamental problem of displaced people in the reconstruction of Europe was not just a European problem but also "a world problem": the crowd of displaced people was considered "the most dangerous

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Archives, *Unrra, Bureau of Services, Division of Repatriation and Welfare, Reports files*, box 1, *Preliminary Summary of Report on Refugees and Displaced Persons: an Urgent United Nations Problem*, by Pierce Williams, Dept. of Social Work Adm., Russell Sage Foundation, New York, October 15, 1946.

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time bomb left behind by Hitler".<sup>2</sup> The potential "explosiveness" of men and women displaced in camps and collective centers was inconsistent with the guiding principle of nationality, since refugees are "not only without a home but also without a country".<sup>3</sup> The refugees did not possess those "moral and legal ties"<sup>4</sup> constituting the relationship between the individual and the State by which women and men become citizens.

In this international context the British government planned to employ Baltic women refugees as attendants in English sanatoria. The Ministry of Labor officials called this plan "Balt Cygnet Operation" (1946). This was the first resettlement initiative dedicated to refugees coming from the German camps and as such it can be considered a sort of "pilot project", because after this Great Britain and other countries planned wider programs of this type (Kay and Miles 1992).

#### The "Balt Cygnet Operation"

The "Balt Cygnet" operation provided for the employment of unattached young women from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as sanatorium attendants, recruited from German camps situated in the British zone. Undoubtedly, the motivation for this project derived from the labor shortage, which troubled Great Britain as well as a large part of Europe during its reconstruction after World War II. But the "Balt Cygnet" operation was an attempt not only to fill the labor force gap but also to replace and absorb displaced people in a new country. Starting from this twofold perspective the British plan was rife with contradictions, given that the integration of the Baltic refugees was constrained both by the difficult post-war situation and the demands of the labor market. The fact that the "Balt Cygnet" was focused only on women is significant for understanding the nature of the project, as are the other specified qualifications for program selection (nationality, age, the women's "unattached" status).

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<sup>2</sup> Pieter Jan Bouman, *The Refugee Problem in Western Germany*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1950, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Vernant, *The Refugee in the Post-war World. Preliminary Report of Survey of the Refugee Problem*, United Nations, Geneva, 1951, p. 4.

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If the “Balt Cygnet” operation was the way to meet the need for sanatorium attendants, then the choice of women is connected to the female connotation of the profession of care-provider, which was thus reinforced. Yet if we consider the project as an initial attempt at resettlement, the exclusive focus on women assumes a different meaning, hinting at the need to neutralize the refugee threat. Even before World War II, public opinion held that refugees, who were “without a country” and persecuted for ideological or racial reasons, had an “ambiguous political loyalty”, and represented a danger for national communities.<sup>5</sup> After the war, in England this distrust took shape as a specific suspicion regarding refugees from Eastern Europe who were considered German collaborationists and Nazi sympathizers.<sup>6</sup> The recruitment of women was one way to avoid introducing politically dangerous persons into the country. Obviously, this way of thinking assumes a social construction of women as uninterested in politics and differently involved in the events of the war (Bethke 1981). According to the socio-cultural construction of gender roles, women do not fire weapons. So in the case of women from the Baltic nations, it meant that the women had not fought on the German side and could be easily depicted as mere victims. The “Balt Cygnet” operation thus contributed to the “depoliticization” of the profile of the female refugee. In this perspective, the choice of sanatoria as place of employment for the first displaced people arriving in England seems to be a consequence of the political – not just economic – necessity of employing only women.

In addition, the decision to assign these women to hospitals for TB patients seems motivated by the following reasons:

- a) the collective mobilization against TB that had spread widely during the war.
- b) the reluctance of English women to take on this dangerous job because of the risk of contagion and also remote location of the sanatoria, which

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> John Hope Simpson, *The Refugee Problem. Report of a Survey*, London, Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 15.

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made the work less profitable

c) the preference for sending refugees arriving from Germany to isolated places where they would be easier to control and less likely to be in contact with native citizens

d) the advantage of combining the employment of foreign women (characterized by a sort of uncertain status) with the impression of devotion to service in the public interest

Beginning in October 1946, there were hundreds of women who departed each week from Cuxhaven (on the German coast) to arrive at Hull (on the British coast). Because of their gender, they were able to leave behind the difficulties of camp life, but constrained by this compromise: the host country eclipsed their identity as refugees by promoting the idea that they were workers useful to the community, while cautiously confining them to its border regions. This cultural alchemy, combining different elements of women's socially constructed roles, was of interest not only to the British government, but also to the officers of the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), who noted that the success of "Balt Cygnet" operation was important for future programs involving the displaced peoples of Europe.<sup>7</sup>

### Elite refugees

Being a woman was the primary requirement for the British program; the second requirement was that the women come from a Baltic country.<sup>8</sup> Gender and nationality were united in this definition of the refugee's right to be resettled. The preferential treatment given to the Baltic women certainly took into account the fact that the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian refugees constituted a group for whom return to their country of origin was impossible, given that these countries

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<sup>6</sup> John Allan Tannahill, *European Volunteer Workers in Britain*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1958, pp. ix-x.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Archives, *Unrra, Germany Mission. British Zone. Headquarters' Area Team Files. 1945-1947*, Box 21, *Employment of Baltic D.P.s. in T.B. Sanatoria in the United Kingdom*.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Unrra's statistics in December 1945 around 134.000 displaced from the Baltic region lived in the German camps; at least 40.000 Balt refugees lived outside the camps; cfr. George Woodbridge, *Unrra: The History of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1950, vol. III, p. 423.

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had become republics of the Soviet Union. Yet the choice to organize a resettlement program exclusively for Baltic women refugees was also the result of the clear recognition signaled by the personnel in the refugee centers who noted that "there is general agreement that the elite of the DP [Displaced Person] population is to be found within [the Baltic] group".<sup>9</sup> With its feminine inflection, the requirements for the "Cygnet" program focused on factors considered characteristic of the Baltic "elite" such as good manners and appearance, orderliness and cleanliness. "The [Baltic] women are of good appearance; they are scrupulously clean in their persons and habits" reads a note in one of the reports drafted by the Ministry of Labor,<sup>10</sup> with similar expressions recurring elsewhere. There is also an insistence on the personal characteristics attributed to Baltic women in the brief reports of the discussions of the UNRRA officials pertaining to the selection of the young women who, following the medical examinations, met with the committee dispatched for this purpose by the Ministry of Labor and which was responsible for their final enrollment in the program. For example, regarding Laine Kitsberg, a 22-year-old Estonian woman, they note that she possesses "good appearance and good manners", while the brief notes regarding the Tiits sisters, Feida and Agnes, Estonian women aged 28 and 23 respectively, state: "well groomed, good manners".<sup>11</sup>

Naturally the emphasis placed on the exceptional qualities of the Baltic women was due to the type of occupation for which they were being recruited: a passion for cleanliness and good manners were important qualifications for work in a TB sanatorium. Yet the fact that such qualities were not considered as subjective features but rather as typical of all the women belonging to a particular nationality suggests that they were considered as expressions of a more general character, concrete indicators - like personal grooming - which were, however, taken as expressions of moral virtues considered essential for their assimilation in a new country, not just requirements for successfully carrying out their job. In addition, it

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<sup>9</sup> National Archives, Prem 8/522, *Refugees and displaced persons. British zone in Germany.*

<sup>10</sup> National Archives, Lab 8/90, *Recruitment of Baltic Displaced Persons for Hospital Employment.*

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Archives, *Unrra, Germany Mission. British Zone. Headquarters' Area Team Files. 1945-1947, Box 21, Application for Employment in TB Sanatoria in U.K.*

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was vital to be sure that women refugees coming from Germany possessed moral integrity, since reports tended to emphasize the fact that war-time experiences could lead to a breakdown of social mores,<sup>12</sup> while the promiscuity of camp life resulted in a rise in the number of illegitimate births.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, British female identity hinged on respectability and decorum (Skeggs 1997: 41-55), making it absolutely essential that the arrival of these foreign women not pose any threat to the internal equilibrium of British society.

The characteristic features of the Baltic women, therefore, allowed the authorities directing the English resettlement to single them out with respect to the other women refugees, providing above all a guarantee of their better suitability for their new country. These factors come into play on another front as well, not having to do with the selection of the Baltic women among the refugee population but with the privileging of this group over the streams of immigrants from the former British colonies which begin to take shape after the Second World War. The political debate at this time regarding the emerging populations coming from Asia or from Africa reveals a clear preoccupation for the political and social consequences of a "colored immigration" still, however, under control (Salomos 2003: 49-52), and highlights the reassuring aspects of a white immigration, which thanks to skin color reduces the actual differences of the incoming population and favors a reception based on assimilation, the basic principle adopted by the British government in its provisions regarding immigration questions (Paul 1997). The whiteness of the "cygnet" which gave rise to the name of the first resettlement operation undertaken by the European governments seems to symbolically link the racial component of a selection based on nationality and the decorum provided by its feminine focus. This combination no doubt had a calming effect on public opinion, while adhering to the logic of integration adopted by the English government in confronting refugee issues,<sup>14</sup> reflecting a

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<sup>12</sup> United Nations Archives, *Unrra, Bureau of Services, Division of Repatriation and Welfare, Reports files*, box 1, *Special Needs of Women and Girls during Repatriation and Rehabilitation*.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Archives, *Unrra, Bureau of Services, Division of Repatriation and Welfare, Subject files*, box 23, *Compendium of Statistics on Displaced Persons*.

<sup>14</sup> On «policy of assimilation» of the British authority towards European refugees cfr. John Allan Tannahill, *European Volunteer Workers in Britain*, cit., pp. 68-69.

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general tendency to assimilating the differences introduced by the immigrants into an inclusive and homogenous Englishness (Paul 1992: 452-473).

Yet the objective of assimilating refugee populations does not appear to be simply a matter of priorities set by the British authorities, but rather involves the larger necessity of finding a definitive resolution to the problem of the displaced Europeans, which was faced by all the western countries. In fact, as can be seen in the first major study undertaken by the U.N. on this subject, the refugee ceases to be a refugee by acquiring a new nationality,<sup>15</sup> which does not simply mean the legal acquisition of citizenship in a specific country, but rather with full membership in the national community of that country. It is only this kind of belonging, in fact, which can prevent the resettled population from emerging as "another minority" within the host society, and therefore weakening the internal cohesion of the country or introducing causes for unrest. The men and women refugees pose this risk to a greater degree than other foreign populations because their attachment to their own national identity - violently extirpated within its own territorial boundaries - comes to represent "their most prized possession".<sup>16</sup>

The intersection of gender and nationality promoted by the "Balt Cygnet" program thus lays bare one of its inherent contradictions: the exclusive focus on women from Baltic nations only represented an attempt to find a female profile that would easily fit the British profile, but at the same time it recognizes and thus reinforces the principle of nationality which was considered in and of itself a barrier to future integration. The effects of this contradiction can be seen in the way that the authorities in charge of the program began by praising the "national dignity" for which the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian women were being singled out, but then was quick to commend the fact that the candidates selected to enroll did not have any desire "to live in a segregated group in this country, but wish[ed] to

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Vernant, *The Refugee in the Post-war World*, cit., p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Archives, *Unrra, Germany Mission. British Zone. Headquarters' Area Team Files. 1945-1947*, Box 21, *Displaced Persons – Germany 1947*. By Pauline Bakerman UNRRA (January 2, 1945 to June 10, 1947).

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become part of the community here".<sup>17</sup> The initial slow pace of the resettlement program was attributed to the young women's ambivalence, based in part on their fear of contracting TB but also to the reluctance with which they regarded the separation from their families, and more generally to breaking their ties to the Baltic communities which had been reconstituted within the life of the camps and which saw in the departure of these young women a loss which undermined those communities (Wyman 1998: 192-193).

#### "Unattached"

Besides nationality, there were other requirements of the British program. The women had to be between 18 and 45 years of age, healthy, and "unattached", meaning either that the women were unmarried or widows, without children. The health staff of UNRRA had to certify the good health of the potential beneficiaries of the "Balt Cygnet" operation, and they also had to detect any possible pregnancy, which would disqualify the potential candidate. The reason for this condition was to protect the employers from the economic damages posed by the temporary loss of their new employee, and it was also a response to the lack of beds in British maternity hospitals and the difficulty of finding good places for mothers who would be raising children on their own without assistance since their families had been left behind in the refugee camp.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the idea of integrating the Baltic refugees depended on their exclusion from the welfare system ("they would deprive married British women of maternity beds"), even though the Labor government considered social rights a perquisite of citizenship. The exclusion was strictly enforced, and when pregnant women were discovered they were immediately returned by the authorities. Between May 1 and October 31 of 1947, Home Office data show that there were 16 cases of women returned to Germany for reasons of pregnancy, out of a total of 24 deportations. Among the "health grounds" for deportation, pregnancy was the largest single cause, even taking into account the total number of "returned" persons, including both

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<sup>17</sup> National Archives, Lab 8/90, *Recruitment of Baltic Displaced Persons for Hospital Employment*.

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men and women.<sup>19</sup> This exclusion of pregnant women is a more extreme expression of the fundamental qualification according to which women participating in the resettlement program were not allowed to have children - a qualification which is quite unnatural considering the age of the women enrolled in the program. In order to overcome their displaced status, the women were asked to deny their maternal identity, which was a central component of the women's social role in Baltic cultures (Webster 2000) and which was also affirmed in the European democracies in which they were to be "integrated". Women were to leave their children in the refugee camps in order to come to Great Britain,<sup>20</sup> while women that succeeded in concealing their pregnancy in order to reach England then resorted to clandestine abortions in order to escape detection and deportation.<sup>21</sup>

The requirement that only "unattached" women could apply to the program was justified not only on the grounds of a lack of adequate social services, but also on the scarcity of housing in post-war England. Single women could find lodgings in the group dormitories affiliated with the sanatoria, while the same solution would not work for families. The basis for this preference, which was a fundamental element in the first resettlement program dedicated to European refugees, shows a perception that single women are to be preferred to families because they constitute the resulting individual units of a group that has disintegrated, rather than as the constitutive cells of an expatriate community. The logic of assimilation is again at work here, which demands the dissolution of previous social ties. For this reason the "Balt Cygnet" program cut family and community ties specifically with regard to those female figures who are usually entrusted with the preservation of cultural traditions in the construction of national identity

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<sup>18</sup> See the Ministry of Health comments addressed to the Home Office Alien Division, National Archives, HO213/1001.

<sup>19</sup> Between May and October 1947 among the «returned» there are: 16 pregnant women, 3 cases of T.B. (2 men and 3 women), 10 cases of mental illness (6 men and 4 women), 14 cases of venereal disease (11 men and 3 women); cfr. National Archives, HO 213/1001, *Numbers returned to Germany on Health Grounds*.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. the letter sent by the Unrra headquarter in Hannover to the suboffices, United Nations Archives, *Unrra, Germany Mission. British Zone. Headquarters' Area Team Files. 1945-1947*, Box 21.

<sup>21</sup> The cases of abortion among Balt refugees are denounced by the Ministry of Labour, National Archives, HO213/1001, *Letter to Mrs McKenzie, Ministry of Health*.

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(Yuval-Davis 1997). The distancing of the family and of the community prevented the women from fulfilling this social role, zeroing out their individual and collective story while guaranteeing the dissolution of the group. This was a necessary requirement for the admission of the Baltic refugees, given the conviction that “kept in big groups, their fanatic hatreds and nationalistic hopes would be built up rather than dissipated”.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions

The “Balt Cygnet” operation imposed on the participating women a further stage in the multiple disjunctions of their lives, as they had already lost their homes and domestic landscape, their daily occupations, their country, their possessions, and their affective relationships. Moreover, the resettlement obliged the women to leave their family, already divided by their displacement and the events of the war. But this last separation, unlike the previous ones, did not ratify the refugee status of these thousands of women arriving in Great Britain. On the contrary, their refugee status was suddenly erased, since they had to waive the claims of their loss in order to be assimilated in the host society. Yet the British operation did not grant full citizenship in exchange for the assimilation to the host communities and the repudiation of any claims as refugees, so that in the end it conferred only a partial belonging, consigning these women to the borders of society. For example, the fact that the women refugees were forced to work contradicts the widespread opinion that female respectability was founded upon devotion to family and the renunciation of extradomestic activities. (Webster 1998). The Baltic women – as workers and as “unattached” women – were exactly the opposite of the British women, who could be housewife, wife, and mother, as the resettlement strategies intersected the sociocultural construction of gender, class, and ethnic identities. The British experience of the “Balt Cygnet operation” serves as a kind of laboratory testing the effects of both the political and the social meaning of resettlement and the idea of integration. It reveals a

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<sup>22</sup> United Nations Archives, *Unrra, Germany Mission. British Zone. Headquarters' Area Team Files. 1945-1947*, Box 21, *Displaced Persons – Germany 1947*. By Pauline Bakerman UNRRA (January 2, 1945 to June

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Western Europe dedicated to rebuilding national democracies that receive refugees without recognizing their story or their rights. This kind of integration coincides with a push towards boundaries determined by the type of employment, by ethnic group but most of all by gender identity.

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