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## Moral readaptation of young refugees from behind the Iron Curtain

### **Motion for a recommendation<sup>1</sup>**

Committee on Culture, Science and Education

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1. 1956 - 8th Session - First part



## **A. Draft Recommendation<sup>2</sup>**

The Assembly,

Having regard to Recommendation 30 (1950) on the urgent necessity of assistance to Refugees ;

Having regard to Recommendation 13 (1951) on the problems of refugees and overpopulation;

Having regard to Recommendation 35 (1952) on the international financing of the rehabilitation of refugees and surplus elements of population;

Considering that the moral readaptation of young refugees from beyond the Iron Curtain must be regarded as a European responsibility;

Considering that the work undertaken by such organisations as the " European Education Community " has already provided a basis for the accomplishment of this task,

Recommends that the Committee of Ministers :

1. Invite the Governments of Member States to help to organise the work of moral readaptation of young refugees from behind the Iron Curtain and make available the financial and administrative assistance required for this purpose;
2. Consider to what extent the institutions of the Council of Europe itself might be of service in carrying out this operation.

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2. See 5th Sitting, 18th April, 1956 (draft Recommendation adopted after amendment) and Recommendation 92.

## **B. Explanatory Memorandum (presented by M. VAN REMOORTEL, Vice-Chairman of the Committee)**

### **1.**

#### **1.1. The problem as such**

The constant stream of refugees reading Western Europe is due to the sharp contrast in economic, political, social and spiritual conditions in the countries on either side of the Iron Curtain.

The most remarkable feature is that half of the total of some fifteen to twenty thousand refugees arriving each month is made up of young people under 25.

So long as these contrasts between Eastern and Western Europe persist, there is little prospect that the flood of refugees will come to an end; indeed, it may be expected to increase.

The conclusion which is confirmed by statistics, is that the young people of the Iron Curtain countries, comparing life in the " East " with life in the " West ", as things are to-day, still find the latter a powerful magnet.

Another significant aspect of the problem is that, after some six to twelve months, increasing numbers of young refugees return to their home country because they find it impossible to adapt themselves to living conditions in the West. In the first half of 1954 this percentage was approximately 10 %; it has now approximately doubled.

#### **1.2. European impact of the problem**

We have seen that the younger generation has thus to face up to the contrast between the social environment of Eastern Europe and that of the West.

The European Education Community for young refugees from Iron Curtain countries, sponsored by the Netherlands in September 1953, has undertaken a study of their particular problem—the reasons for which some of them return behind the Iron Curtain, the operative factors which may promote or hinder their assimilation—and has set out to find means of assisting them.

Its activities are based on the following principles :

- a. The great number of young refugees returning to their own country is evidence of a failure of the West to make the conditions of democratic life and society acceptable to young people brought up under a communist regime.
- b. However the situation in Europe may develop, the West should start with the assumption that in some manner the Iron Curtain will in due course be raised. Relations will then be resumed between Eastern and Western European peoples, and the resulting exchanges of views will decisively affect the future of our respective national institutions. We already know from our experience with young refugees the limitations of these contacts, and the nature of the misunderstandings they bring to light. As it is, 20 % of these refugees return behind the Iron Curtain, which means that, when that barrier is removed, Western Europe will have great difficulty in bringing the Eastern European peoples to understand its conception of liberty.

The greatest danger for free democratic thought will arise when Eastern Europe has the opportunity to decide its own fate. If, at the present time, 20 % of the 10,000 young refugees who have made contact with the West decide to return to the bosom of a totalitarian society, what will happen when those who have never left it are called upon to make their choice?

#### **1.3. Assimilation — a spiritual problem**

An analysis of the spiritual factors involved has convinced the European Education Community that, though the West has many failings which may be broadly described as the " crisis of Western culture ", the underlying causes of its failure to absorb so many refugees are to be found, not in those failings, but in the fact that the refugees, who come from varied walks of life and have been moulded by political indoctrination, are unable without help to find their feet in the free society of the West.

To open this world to the young refugees, to make them feel at home in their new surroundings, must be considered among our most important tasks.

The European Education Community has worked out methods of assisting this process of spiritual integration. The proportion of refugees returning behind the Iron Curtain is at present 20 % but not one of those assisted by the Community is among their number. The problem is thus not insoluble; it is possible to understand the mentality of these young refugees, whose minds have been warped by Communist propaganda, and apply the right kind of mental therapy. This is a useful preparation for the ideological confrontation which will one day take place between Eastern and Western Europe.

#### **1.4. Methods**

The context of the problem is not material but spiritual. Communist education and propaganda are designed to transform the whole intellectual and spiritual outlook, to break off all contact with European democratic traditions. The issue is one of political philosophy.

After much first-hand experience we have found that the only way of getting to the heart of the problem, of clearing away all sources of perplexity and confusion, is by a frank and impartial discussion of political issues. On the Western side, the following conditions are essential :

- a. A thorough knowledge of, and sincere faith in, the principles of Western democracy.
- b. An equally thorough knowledge of the dialectical materialism which has been inculcated into these young persons' minds.

On this basis, a number of special courses have been organised, lasting generally no more than a fortnight. The discussion following a brief introduction usually bear upon two main themes :

- a. Man in relation to society;
- b. Man in relation to the State.

Under these two headings there is a wide freedom of choice; actual subjects are suggested by current events. It has been found necessary for a clear understanding of subjects coming under (a) to deal especially with the relations of individuals with the institutions with which society frequently brings them into contact : employment agencies, youth organisations, trade unions, etc.

Subjects discussed under group (b) have included the Council of Europe, N. A. T. O., E. C. S. C. and current topics such as the Paris Agreements, the Geneva Conference, German sovereignty, etc..

Needless to say, there is no question of advocating preconceived political views. The aim has always been to start with actual events, to deduce certain main principles and to point out the real significance of the issue from the Western point of view.

This emphasis on principles has always been found essential. In many cases, only after talks of this kind has it been possible to elicit even a glimmering of understanding of Western ideas. Without them, the refugees are completely bewildered by their new environment.

The courses, which partake of a recreational character, are not held in the camps. Groups are formed, of a maximum of 25 to 30 members. Rambles, party games, film shows and plays are arranged for, by way of entertainment; they create a friendly atmosphere and greatly facilitate free discussion.

#### **1.5. The refugee problem is not only a German problem**

Although the refugees are mainly from the Soviet Zone or the German Democratic Republic, it should be pointed out that this is not merely a German national problem, but one of European dimensions, which places upon us responsibilities of a European character. This is not only because of the factors mentioned in 2 (b) above, but also because our experience has invariably shown that young refugees are sincerely interested in weighing up the spiritual values of the West, and show much less concern for specifically German problems than for the strained relations between the free world and the subjugated countries. The participation of non-German monitors in these courses has greatly helped to open the minds of the refugees to democratic ideas.

#### **1.6. Experimental courses**

Thanks to private initiative, an experimental series of courses for refugees has already been held outside Germany, in Switzerland and the Netherlands. These courses had unexpected results, partly because the refugees learned something of living conditions in countries of which they were much less critical than of

Western Germany, and partly because their contacts with the youth of Switzerland and the Netherlands were extremely valuable to both parties. The youth of the non-German countries found its convictions confirmed, and its faith in European values strengthened.

It would seem essential, therefore, in order to carry out this work of spiritual assimilation, to obtain funds to finance courses for young refugees in the various European countries.

## **1.7. Conclusions**

### *1.7.1. Number of persons*

At the lowest estimate, the monthly number of refugees has in the past year fluctuated between 15,000 and 20,000. In the last few months, there has even been a sharp rise to above 25,000.

Of this total some 50 % are invariably young people of under 25—which means that an average of 10,000 young people reach Western Germany each month.

About 25 % of these may be considered sufficiently mature to pass conscious judgment upon the differences between the Western world and the world of constraint. Assuming that 20 % of these 2,500 are not satisfied with materialistic arguments and are therefore not convinced by the single fact that the living standards are incomparably higher in the West than in the East, we are left with at least 500 a month who might well wash their hands of the West and return behind the Iron Curtain.

This minimum of 500 persons a month should therefore attend the type of course described in previous paragraphs.

### *1.7.2. Number of courses*

If the work is to be effective, each course should be attended by no more than 25 individuals—which thus leads to the figure of 20 courses a month.

### *1.7.3. Location of the courses*

The courses should not be held at fixed centres, for this would involve the upkeep of buildings, etc., and reduce opportunities for contact between the Western population and the refugees.

Rather should they be held at places chosen in agreement with existing national and local organisations. These could be of considerable assistance in the local organisation of courses, by reducing costs and the necessary bureaucratic machinery and by strengthening contacts between the local population and the refugees.

### *1.7.4. Organisation of the courses*

The courses should, normally, not exceed two to three weeks. It would be best to accommodate those concerned in the homes of local families, for the two-fold purpose of multiplying contacts and reducing expenditure.

The courses would include :

*introductory lectures on the life, thought, history and structure of Western society, followed by discussions;*

*visits to undertakings and municipal councils, museums and theatres, etc., each followed by a discussion.*

### *1.7.5. Teaching staff*

Each course would require the services of two experts employed by the central organisation. Such persons should possess a thorough knowledge of the mentality of Eastern youth as well as of Western thought. They might be assisted by representatives of local intellectual, cultural, political, economic and social life, who would also give introductory talks and reply to questions.

#### *1.7.6. Implementation*

There is no question, at first, of reaching the ultimate goal of 20 courses a month. It seems feasible to achieve this by stages, aiming in the first place at five courses a month.

These courses would, of course, be held in other Western European countries as well as in Germany.

#### *1.7.7. Costs*

The cost of these courses can only be assessed step by step as the whole scheme is progressively put into operation. The original programme may well undergo certain changes in the light of experience.

The Government and various public and private organisations of the Federal Republic of Germany have already been active in this field. Since most of the refugees are of German origin, it is only natural that the major part of these expenses should be defrayed from German sources.

What is asked of the other Member Governments of the Council of Europe is, therefore, primarily a gesture of European solidarity which would give the young refugees the feeling that they are being welcomed not only by their own country but also by the whole family of free European nations.