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Steps to be taken towards the moral readaptation of young refugees from behind the Iron Curtain

Opinion[1]
Relations with European Non-Member Countries
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1. Since the post-war division of Europe into two parts by the Iron Curtain and the increasing suppression of freedom and independence in the countries behind the Curtain by the establishment of authoritarian Communist régimes, there has been a steady stream of refugees towards the West.

Although, in the immediate post-war years, it was relatively easy for Eastern Europeans to find their way to the West when they were no longer willing to share the life of an authoritarian Communist State, in recent years, on the other hand, the isolation of the satellite countries has been greatly increased, with the result that the possibilities of escaping to freedom in the West have remained virtually unrestricted only in the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany, whereas the chance of escape from the other countries has been reduced to a minimum. At least 97 % of the refugees who reach Western Europe from the East now come from the Soviet Zone of Germany.

The reasons for escape are the same for both the Soviet Zone and the satellite countries, the only difference being that it is much easier to take an inter-zonal train from Eastern Germany to t h e Federal Republic or to walk across the inter-zonal frontier on a visit to East Berlin t h a n to risk one's life b y crossing the minefields along the Hungarian frontier or the electric grid along the Czech frontier.

So far as our present problem is concerned, however, this means that, whereas an average of 50 % of refugees from the Soviet Zone of Germany are young people under 25 years of age, t h e proportion is considerably higher for refugees from the satellite countries. Only young people from these countries can face the dangers and exertions involved in escape to the West.

It is difficult to establish comprehensive statistics for refugees from the satellite countries, and t h i s for several reasons : whereas refugees from Eastern Germany all find their way to the Federal Republic, some Poles and citizens of the Baltic States t r y to make their escape to Sweden. Moreover, there is a steady stream of Czech and Hungarian refugees to Austria, and refugees from the Balkan States make their way to Turkey. Another factor is t h a t most of these refugees from the satellite countries fairly soon find an opportunity of going overseas, to Australia, Canada or America.

Whereas, therefore, the general problem affects Eastern Europe as a whole, the undoubted centre of gravity is Germany. Its vast extent may be seen from the citing of a few figures relating to recent years.

From 1949 to 1951, 492,681 refugees reported at reception centres in the Federal Republic. This number increased by 977,662 in the period from 1st January, 1952 to 31st January, 1956, so t h a t between 1949 and 31st January, 1956, a total of 1,470,343 inhabitants of the Soviet Zone of Germany chose to seek asylum in the West. There is no likelihood t h a t this stream of refugees will abate so long as Eastern Germany and the satellite countries remain under Communist domination. The most striking fact concerning the refugee situation is the consistent evidence that half the people concerned are young people under 25 years of age.

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To quote recent statistics : in January of the current year 26,811 people fled from the Soviet Zone of Germany, of whom 12,920 (i.e. 48.2 %) were under 25 years of age. These 12,920 included 5,315 unattached persons, who thus constituted 19.8 % of the total.

The number of non-German refugees entering Germany from behind the Iron Curtain is 200 a month. Since 30th June, 1950, 10,000 non-German refugees have arrived in the Federal Republic of Germany from Soviet countries. For the year 1955 the figures were :

January 179

February 219

March 240

April 233

May 171

June-July 305

August-September 460

October - November - December (670

Total 2,477

The nationalities of the 670 refugees who arrived during the three months period from October to end of December were as follows :

Bulgarian 22

Yugoslav 240

Lithuanian 1

Polish 72

Roumanian 8

Czech 151

Russian 10

Hungarian 53

No apparent nationality (in general, persons born in Russia who refuse to be considered as Russians) 151.

It must be pointed out that refugees from behind the Iron Curtain ai'rived just as irregularly in other countries, such as Austria, Italy and Turkey; statistics for these countries are not, however, available. Those mentioned here refer only to arrivals in the Federal Republic of Germany.

The number of persons making unsuccessful attempts to escape from countries occupied by the Soviet authorities is, of course, unknown. Only a small number of those persons fleeing to the free world arrive safe and sound; most of those trying to escape are killed by frontier guards of the Soviet countries.

It goes without saying t h a t after their arrival in the free world non-German refugees experience the same political and psychological difficulties as German refugees; they are further handicapped by the language difficulty.

2. That this vast stream of refugees presents an enormous problem is self-evident. Nor need it be explained that the main problem is to provide t h em with a new basis for existence. Without work, food and housing the inevitable result is social impoverishment. Fortunately, it may be reported that this aspect of the problem has now very largely been solved. The present economic prosperity has given rise to a steadily increasing demand for new labour, and reception methods have been developed to a machine-like degree of perfection, so that, in practice, the young refugee—for we shall confine our attention to this group—is usually put through the various camps and is able to find his first job within a few months, or even a few weeks of his arrival.

Then, however, begins a problem which has so far only received preliminary study and is still by no means solved. A young man who has grown up and been educated in a totalitarian Communist society finds, on leaving this environment, that he is in a new world whose principles, motives and aspirations are incomprehensible, because his whole spiritual outlook bears the stamp of his former environment and education. Not until then can he make t h e first comparisons between the Communist system—the only one which be knows by experience—and the reality of free Western society, for although he rejected the former he could only contrast it with his dreams of a " Western paradise ".

In point of fact, this comparison is not only accompanied by a long and painful spiritual and moral struggle to absorb new values, but too often ends in a defeat which leaves him no alternative but to return to his former home, for the young refugee is thrown entirely upon his own resources and has, hitherto, had no prospect of expert assistance.

Admittedly, there are already many good hostels in which young refugees can find shelter during the first six months of their life in the West, but these hostels cannot cope with more than 10 % of the demand, and the attentions received in such hostels are mainly of a social nature and are not systematically adapted to meet the spiritual needs of a person making his first attempt to come to terms with Western society. Actually, 70 % of young refugees receive neither spiritual nor social help and are left entirely to their own resources, for, in addition to the 10 % who find accommodation in hostels, there are a further 20 % who find human contact through religious or other organisations or through family guilds.

The tragic result of this situation is t h a t 15 % abandon the struggle in sheer desperation and return to their homes behind the Iron Curtain.

It can well be imagined what fate awaits them. They are punished for their escape and their betrayal, are re-indoctrinated, and their one remaining chance of survival is to let themselves become completely assimilated by the Communist regime and to support the Communist cause. The influence of such " misfits " on their fellow-citizens must be all too obvious. They have gained a first-hand experience of the West and can confidently state with what justification the Communist regime attacks the West. In each of them Europe loses a little of its vitality.

3. The statement that 15 % of young refugees abandon the struggle to acquire new standards of freedom is only based on a rough estimate. No firm statistics are available, and some estimates are as high as 22 %. But, be the proportion 15 or 20 %, the crux of the matter is that the spiritual assimilation of young refugees is proved to be an unsolved problem. Moreover, there can be no doubt that this is the main problem, for there is no doubt that those returning had enjoyed a much higher standard of living in t h e West t h a n in t h e East. Nor must the number of returning refugees be interpreted as meaning t h a t the remaining 85 % have come to terms with the liberal way of life on which t h e future of Europe will be built. Many refugees remain in the West but in ther in most selves have abandoned the unequal struggle. They have experienced and rejected Bolshevism without understanding the free world or deriving any satisfaction from it. They fall back upon a hard materialistic nihilism and build their lives purely upon self-interest and the satisfaction of their personal needs.

However difficult the problem of the spiritual assimilation of young refugees may appear, it is, nevertheless, one that can be solved. The point of departure must be a genuine understanding of the conflict which the yoting refugee must undergo, the basis of which is totalitarian conditioning. It may be true that the refugee has rejected Communism, but his whole conception of society reflects an education which has been based from start to finish on political considerations. He sees the world through the spectacles of totalitarian Communism. Young people arriving in the West from the Eastern Zone of Germany speak a language which may superficially be described as German, but the words of which have long since lost their original meaning. Hence the frequent misunderstandings, the disconcerting reactions and incredible misinterpretations which find expression in the words of these young people when they judge the simplest events of the West. How can these young people be expected of their own accord to correct all these warped and mistaken conceptions and re-adapt them to Western thought? What is much more astonishing t h a n the frequent failures is that, after years of effort, so many do succeed 'in making t h e adjustment.

Here lies what we may describe as our European responsibility. There can be no doubt that, despite the tremendous efforts of the Government of Eastern Germany to harness the mind and spirit of the younger generation to Communism (the German Democratic Republic alone spends at least 300 million D.M. on the indoctrination of youth), the power of attraction of free Europe is so great, t h a t the overwhelming majority look longingly towards the freedom of Western Europe. Some of t h em escape and reach the Free Europe, and it is the bounden duty of the latter to help these young people to acquire the cultural values of which Europe is the embodiment.

The decisive factor is that the whole life of these young people has been spent in a society entirely conditioned by political considerations. The transition from this politically centred society to the Western type of society, based on human and personal values, is one between two completely different worlds. It cannot be accomplished without a spiritual upheaval, which may be defined by the term " political enlightenment." It should be pointed out, for instance, that young people in Eastern Germany are not only wooed but also supervised and spied upon by the Government. Their every move is observed—admittedly only insofar as it has political significance—-but the fact still remains. That is to say an interest is taken in every young person, and he knows why he is important to the régime, for it is working for the conquest of the free world and needs the help of every single individual. He is continually conscious, therefore, of being at the centre of a decisive, world-wide struggle for the future. He rejects this régime and he comes to the West, that is to say into a world where politics are subsidiary, but where he is also free. Now, for the first time in his life, he can say what he wants without fear of retribution and can go about unobserved by spies; and this removal of all political compulsion fills him with delight. However, he also wishes to acquire importance as a man in this society based on human values, but nobody is interested in him. Whereas in the East he had lived in a world where everyone must do his utmost for a definite political cause— a cause which would reshape the universe—he is now confronted with political aspirations which are a mystery to him and whose human motivation seems to him to connote total isolation. It is a world in which freedom seems to him to mean aimlessness, emptiness and narrowness of outlook. Can it be wondered that these young people begin to have doubts, if it is not made clear to them that, despite this apparent slackening of Europe's progress towards unity, a future is being prepared which, from all points of view—social, cultural and political—is far superior to the world they have abandoned?

4 . The purpose of the proposals put before the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe is to place on record Europe's responsibility for this vital problem. Further progress can be made on the basis of the experience acquired in the last three years by the " European Education Community for refugees from behind the Iron Curtain " (Europàischer Bildungsgemeinschaft Eiserner Vorhang). After a period of study, in which this institution analysed experimentally the problem of refugee psychology, it was established that assistance was possible in this field, if only it can be given on a European rather than on a national basis. For the point is not that refugees from the Eastern Zone flee to Western Germany, Hungarian refugees to Austria or Bulgarian refugees to Turkey. It is to Free Europe t h a t all these young people escape from the world of totalitarian Communism. Their spiritual conflict is a conflict between freedom and its absence. This Education Community, after much experiment, has developed a method which has proved its practical value. It has consistently observed two facts : first, that it is possible to give young refugees in spiritual need the sort of counsel which will enable them to shake off the desperation that drives them to go back and will lead them to adopt a positive attitude to the West: second, t h a t it is possible to help young people who, without European help, have the utmost difficulty after years of struggle in adapting themselves to the West, in such a way t h a t they cannot only genuinely accept Free Europe, but also become convinced supporters of all the ideals expounded by the Council of Europe. The preliminary work has already been done, the problem has been fully analysed and a method of assistance has been worked out. It is now our t u r n to show t h a t we realise t h a t the future of Europe rests with youth and that, if we fail now to assimilate in European society and its spiritual life those young people who come into our midst, we shall be betraying the great responsibility which the younger generations of all European countries expect us to assume.

5. The " European Education Community " is a self-governing association, founded in September, 1952 as a result of Dutch initiative. It carried out its studies and experiments in 1953 and 1954 with a t e am of workers including a Dutchman, an Englishman, an Austrian and two Germans. Its resources were derived from private contributions and voluntary grants by the Bonn Government, as well as from the active support of t h e European Movement, and particularly of its Netherlands Council. The President of the Association is Dr. W. Verkade (Netherlands), its Director M. J. C. van Broekhuizen (Netherlands) and its Business Manager M. E. von Sivers (Germany). The Education Community has organised courses for young refugees in Germany, Holland and Switzerland, and its current programme also makes provision for courses in Denmark, Belgium and France. In all these Western European countries national committees have been,or are in process of being, founded. They will be responsible for establishing the work in their countries. The Education Community regards it as important to establish relations between young refugees from Eastern Europe and the youth of these countries, so t h a t both groups may gain a clear conception of t h e meaning of Europe by exchanging opinions and experiences.

6. In September, 1955, a plan for placing this work on a European basis was prepared by the Consultative Assembly of t h e Committee on Cultural Questions of the Council of Europe, which has studied it and given it unanimous approval. At its instigation the Committee on Population and Refugees and the Committee on non-represented Nations have also examined these proposals. During the October session of the Council of Europe a joint sub-committee was convened, in which members of the three above Committees approved the

plan. Moreover, the Committee on non-represented nations instructed one of its members to investigate the work of the European Education Community. Accordingly, he visited Gôttingen, where the Community has its headquarters, and has satisfied himseld that the work achieved is of value. This work is, naturally, in its early stages. With the limited means so far at its disposal, the Community could do no more than give model demonstration courses and encourage other existing organisations to undertake the work of spiritual assimilation on the lines which it had worked out. An adequate contribution to the solution of the question of spiritual assimilation is only possible if much greater resources are made available from European sources.

Finally, it might be useful to draw attention to a further aspect of the problem of assimilation of refugees, and one where it is necessary to walk delicately. While it is essential that refugees should adapt themselves to their new surroundings, it would be a mistake not to help them to maintain their cultural traditions. Several Member States have extended moral and financial assistance on a substantial scale t o cultural and scientific institutions set up by or for refugees. Your Committee is anxious t h a t this process should continue and be developed and strengthened, side by side with t h e readaptation of refugees in t h e Member States where they have, elected to come and live for t h e time being

In these circumstances, the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe has every reason to accept the plan contained in Document 465 and thus adopt the Motion for a Recommendation.