

Accounts of evacuees in ww2



When and how did evacuation happen?

Introduction

Evacuation was a key wartime strategy to protect the civilian population and minimise panic in areas that would likely be enemy targets, but the plans for evacuation were started well in advance of World War II. Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, and the devastation of aerial bombing campaigns during the Spanish Civil War, served to alert the British government to the threat on war and particularly the need to be prepared for air strikes on major cities (Ross, 2001).

The Anderson Committee served to divide Britain up into areas based on risk of air strike, designating areas as being for evacuation, neutral, or reception areas. In September 1938, the British government announced its plans to evacuate 2 million people in the event of war and had found accommodation for up to 4 million people.

The official evacuations started in earnest in September 1939, with 'Operation Pied Piper'. The objective was to evacuate priority groups (children, mothers and children, the pregnant, the disabled, and teachers – as outlined in source 2) from the major cities. During this phase, 3.5 million people were relocated to reception areas, mainly by train, and often on a first come first served basis. The haphazard nature of the evacuation meant that groups were sometimes split, reception areas over-subscribed, and evacuees placed with families who were expecting to receive a different priority group or evacuees of the same social class.

After the fall of France, and the onset of the Blitz, further waves of evacuations continued until September 1944. The priority groups now included the elderly and people were also relocated from coastal towns and ports. In this phase of the evacuations, approximately 200, 000 children were relocated including children who had been earlier evacuated to these areas from the major cities. The government also provided free domestic travel to those who wished to make their own arrangements (Brown, 2005).

Experiences of the evacuees

From our knowledge of the evacuation process, particularly with regard to the haphazard nature of the allocations to reception areas and host families, we might infer that the experiences of evacuees could be quite traumatic.

This is the case for Mrs Preedy, who recounted her experiences of being an evacuee over 45 years later in her book based on her wartime diary (source 7). She was evacuated with her close friends but was separated from them on arrival at the designated reception area. She was billeted with another girl who was not a friend and “ foisted” upon an older and childless couple, which tallies with our understanding that evacuees were often placed with hosts who were expecting a different priority group – in this case, possibly an adult.

The household that Mrs Preedy describes is working-class, with the woman having previously been in service, and the house lacking in heat (as well as emotional warmth), and dimly lit. We can infer that Mrs Preedy is most likely from a middle class background, unused to assisting regularly in household chores, and used to a warmer and brighter environment. This experience

again tallies with our understanding that many evacuees were mismatched with host families on the basis of social class.

Mrs Preedy's account of her wartime experiences is useful as she has based her account on her own contemporaneous diaries. The diaries will, however, likely be dominated by the discomforts she experienced (being separated from her friends, with 'cold' hosts, in their cold home). We are not told how old Mrs Preedy was at the time of her evacuation or how long she was evacuated for but her unhappiness with the experience is palpable.

For one 10 year old (source 11), the contemporaneous account we are given is very basic. After enquiring as to her mother's health, she says that she doesn't like her hosts' faces but refers to not having seen the lady in daylight. We might infer from this that the letter was written soon after a night-time arrival and these first impressions are from a child searching for signs of friendliness in her hosts, and only finding it in their dog. While the letter is not detailed, there is significant value in this child's immediate response to her new environment.

Mr Kops' autobiography, written almost twenty years after the end of the war, recounts his awe at the cleanliness and lavishness of his new surroundings (source 10). Mr Kops was evacuated from a poor district of London to a Buckinghamshire village, making the transition from a poor working class household to a middle class home. Mr Kops does not describe his hosts, or the other evacuees he was billeted with; his recollections are solely on the material benefits of his new environment (such as hot tap water and an indoor loo!). While Mr Kops' autobiography is not based on notes he

made during the war, his account reads as though the unadulterated joy of discovering this new lifestyle is still very much fresh in his mind. Further, his transition from a working class to a middle class home appears to have been as wondrous as Mrs Preedy's transition from a middle class to working class environment was traumatic.

Experience of the host families

Having seen two very different reactions from evacuees to their experiences, we shall now turn our attention to the experiences of the host families who, as with the evacuees, could be expected to find the haphazard allocations system to have been traumatic.

For many, there was a feeling of horror about the condition and behaviour of the children who had been placed with them. One extract from a contemporaneous report published in 1940 (source 14), describes in detail the concerns about the children's lack of hygiene, poor health, poor clothing, and also describes both mothers and children being in the habit of soiling their beds. While this extract undoubtedly describes the views of some, it has been taken from a wider report and it is unclear if the rest of the report is in the same light. Some of the comments made appear almost hysterical, such as the assertion that "one child was suffering from scabies and the majority had it in their hair" [this could have simply been itchiness due to nits] and that the "school had to be fumigated after the reception". While the veracity of some of the comments may be disputed, the excerpt is useful as social commentary as it gives a good insight into the reactions and possibly prejudices of people towards the influx of children and some of their mothers from the inner cities.

For one boy (source 16), having two evacuee children sharing his home didn't appear to be such a traumatic experience. In an interview in September 1939, the boy describes being disappointed that the evacuees were girls, as he'd expected boys, but sounds relaxed and cheerful about "showing them around". The billeting of girls rather than boys to this home may have been a mismatch in the allocation or the child (and his family) may simply have assumed that other boys would be placed in the household. The interview with the boy was made by the BBC in the first month of Operation Pied Piper and was presumably intended to reassure the families of the evacuated, the prospective evacuees, as well as possibly encouraging further host families to come forward. The radio interview is also accompanied by a photograph of the boy, leading a small child on a donkey; as it is unlikely that all radio interviewees were routinely photographed, we might infer that there was a propaganda aspect to this interview and that the photograph was reproduced to promote both the interview and the evacuation programme.

In considering the impact of evacuees on host families, some historians writing almost fifty years after the end of the war noted the disparity in the living conditions between the urban poor and the rural middle-classes (source 18). There is a sense in this account that there was a strong class divide in Britain during the war and that the rural middle class had been oblivious to the living conditions of those in industrial areas. The exposure to the evacuees was considered to be a shocking experience, but one that had united people into a commitment to improving living conditions after the war.

Conclusion

In our consideration of this topic, we have accessed only a few accounts, representing the experiences of child evacuees and their hosts. That said, we are still able to conclude that evacuation had a profound effect on both evacuees and their host families.

For the evacuees, there was undoubted upheaval as they were wrenched from their families and placed in unfamiliar surroundings. Being placed with host families who may not have been expecting a child (but rather an adult), or were from a different social class may have been added to the stress of the evacuation. For the host families, evacuation brought an insight into urban and industrial life that was unexpected and in some cases unwelcome. The condition of the children was for many quite shocking, with wide-ranging concerns about the children's health, attire and conduct.

Historians have access to a wide range of evidence in order to find out about the effects of the evacuation. There is contemporaneous evidence, reflective accounts, and also the works of other historians. Assessing the value of these sources is a matter of judgment as most material is produced with a purpose in mind: determining whether that purpose enhances or undermines the credibility of the source is one of the tasks of the historian.

Bibliography

Assignment sources 1-18 (as provided by client)

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