

The resettlement of Polish refugees after the second world war

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The passing of the Polish Resettlement Act and the creation of the different agencies related to it undoubtedly represented an unprecedented response to the challenge of mass migration in the UK.

When it became clear in 1945, at the end of the second world war, that the Polish forces and refugees abroad would not be able to return to their homeland, the British government took on responsibility for them. The first step was the founding of the Polish Resettlement Corps (PRC) in May 1946. Almost a quarter of a million Polish servicemen supporting the Western Allies found that they could not return home. Soldiers and airmen serving overseas were to be helped through the Corps to stay in the United Kingdom (UK) and settle into civilian life there. Service in the Corps was intended to be an opportunity for retraining and education; it was agreed with the British trade unions that prospective Polish employees could only be

recruited from the PRC and would be placed in 'approved' Ministry of Labour jobs.

The 1947 Polish Resettlement Act aimed to resettle political refugees in the UK, at a time when it was on the verge of an era of considerable population increase based largely on immigration. The Act provided Polish refugees in the UK with entitlement to employment and to unemployment benefit. The Act also laid out the responsibilities of several government departments to provide health services, pension entitlement and education for the Poles.

The Act was welcomed in parliament and considered to be an act of great statesmanship – an act that changed people's attitudes to the foreigners then arriving.



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Nissen hut in Northwick Park Camp, originally built in 1943 as an American field hospital and used from 1947 by the Polish Resettlement Corps.

The Act enabled Poles to integrate in the UK and thus contribute to providing the labour force needed by the British economy in recovering from the war. By the end of 1949, 150,000 Polish soldiers and their dependants had settled in the UK and their descendants continue to make up a large part of the UK's Polish community as it exists today. In due course, the Poles emerged as dedicated contributors to the reconstruction of the UK economy, and Polish refugees became one of the most prosperous immigrant groups in the UK.

This was the first time in the history of migration to the UK that this kind of legislation was brought out, directed uniquely at a refugee group. The Act demonstrated that by providing adequate resources and responding positively to the needs of refugees, the integration process into the host society can be significantly eased.

A good deal of the work linked to this Act involved the creation of the Polish Resettlement Camps. Former army and air force camps were utilised as temporary accommodation for the Polish troops and their families. By October 1946, some 120,000 Polish troops has been quartered in 265 camps throughout the UK. Over the years, wives

and dependants were also brought to Britain to join them, bringing the estimated total to over 249,000. The camps were generally in remote locations with Nissen huts or poor-quality dwellings each occupied by more than one family. The huts were equipped with electric lights and heated by slow combustion stoves but had poor natural ventilation and light. However, for the first generation of Poles they became a symbol of stability, and for the second generation the camps would remain in their memory as happy places, full of freedom.

Alongside the basic needs of the new arrivals in terms of accommodation, health, welfare and employment, there was a considerable demand for education. In 1947, the Committee for the Education of Poles

was set up, with all expenses to be defrayed out of funds provided by parliament. The Committee's principal aim was to "fit [the Poles] for absorption into British schools and British careers whilst still maintaining provision for their natural desire for the maintenance of Polish culture and the knowledge of Polish History and Literature."¹ This involved imparting to them an adequate knowledge of English and of the British way of life through education in appropriate British institutions in order to prepare them for resettlement either in the UK or overseas.

The annual expenditure of the Committee was estimated at about £1,000,000 during the first year of its existence, rising for 1948-49 to £1,500,000. During the seven and a half years of its existence the Committee's expenditure totalled nine million pounds.

Not surprisingly, for the first generation of newcomers the experience of settling down proved to be tougher and lengthier than expected. However, for younger Poles the route of adaptation, integration and even gradual assimilation was more of a natural process, and education provisions helped here enormously. Learning the English language became the basic step to be taken in pursuit of this ambitious plan.

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From March 1948, the Home Secretary announced that applications for British citizenship would be accepted from Polish ex-servicemen and Poles were granted the right to become naturalised British citizens. In the end, the Poles emerged as dedicated contributors to the rebuilt British economy. Those who obtained secondary or higher education found profitable and sometimes prestigious posts in the British labour market and made successful professional careers. Their different culture and tradition, along with the shared traumatic wartime experience, slowly came to be seen as

assets contributing to community life. The Committee's aim of adapting Polish exiles to a new life was slowly being achieved. As one local newspaper article of the time said, "Their assets and pastimes may differ, but that very difference is an asset to the joint community of the town."²

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1. Memorandum from the Minister of Education and the Secretary of the State for Scotland, ED128/146, pp1-2. Report on the Curriculum and Staffing of the Committee's Polish Schools, 13 July 1948, ED128/5, p3.
2. *Melton Mowbray Times*, July 1952

