The resettlement of Polish refugees after the second world war

Agata Blaszczyk

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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. Other solutions. If people wish ultimately to return home, they are less likely to embrace measures that they fear will undermine their ability to do so. It is therefore worth exploring ways of re-constructing the ‘three durable solutions’ so as to allay such anxieties. The Palestinian case shows that if resettlement can be devised and fashioned so as not to undermine the possibility of eventual return, it may prove more palatable.

Finally, it is worth remembering that UNHCR itself continues to hold up voluntary repatriation as the preferred durable solution for all refugees, and resettlement as the last resort. On this the Palestinian refugees are firmly aligned with the UN.

Anne Irfan a.e.irfan@lse.ac.uk
PhD Candidate, International History Department, London School of Economics www.lse.ac.uk
1. The full interview can be found in the UNHCR journal Refugees, September 1987.

Conclusion

The Palestinian refugee situation is in many ways exceptional. Its longevity, scale and institutional uniqueness all distinguish it from most other refugee situations. It can nevertheless offer valuable lessons, not least when it comes to resettlement.

In the case of the Palestinians, resettlement not only failed but barely got off the ground. While the refugees’ opposition to it was driven by political concerns, the situation was not helped by the failure of international humanitarians to engage with them directly. The result has been lasting mistrust and suspicion that have continually plagued the refugees’ relationships with UNRWA in particular, and the UN in general.

The suspicion felt by many Palestinian refugees towards resettlement was also due to the perceived implications of the solution’s permanence. This is certainly not exceptional, in view of many refugee groups’ continuing preference for repatriation over other solutions. If people wish ultimately to return home, they are less likely to embrace measures that they fear will undermine their ability to do so. It is therefore worth exploring ways of re-constructing the ‘three durable solutions’ so as to allay such anxieties. The Palestinian case shows that if resettlement can be devised and fashioned so as not to undermine the possibility of eventual return, it may prove more palatable.

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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.
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 dependents 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.”

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.
Resettlement: where’s the evidence, what’s the strategy?

Alexander Betts

The aims and objectives of resettlement are poorly specified and the outcomes are poorly measured. For resettlement to be effective, it needs a much stronger evidence base and it needs improved coordination at the international level.

Resettlement is an area of refugee policy that too often escapes scrutiny. It is often viewed as inherently benevolent and serves as a means for distant countries and progressive members of civil society to believe that they are ‘making a difference’. And yet, relative to its historical and cultural primacy in major resettlement countries such as the United States (US), Canada and Australia, resettlement’s purpose and outcomes often evade debate or examination.

Many of the more recent European resettlement policies emerged as knee-jerk responses to the European refugee ‘crisis’. For example, the UK’s Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme was extended to 20,000 Syrians for one reason alone: the day after the body of the Syrian refugee child Alan Kurdi was depicted on the front page of every British newspaper, resettlement had become the answer.

The purpose of resettlement is specified with surprising vagueness. It is supposedly a protection tool, a durable solution, a means to strategically leverage other durable solutions, and a form of burden sharing and international solidarity. Yet the impact of resettlement is almost never measured relative to any of these putative purposes. Because aims and objectives are often so imprecisely specified, there are no benchmarks or metrics to hold governments accountable for their resettlement practices or to measure what resettlement actually achieves. It is no wonder that it is so challenging for politicians to justify to electorates.

A few provocative facts hint at why there are at least valid concerns to consider. Resettlement is consistently only available to the few: it is offered to less than 1% of the world’s refugees. It is often not what refugees want: 70% of around 100,000 Syrian refugees approached by UNHCR about resettlement to Canada in late 2015 said they did not want resettlement to Canada. It leads to inequitable allocation of resources: we spend around US$135 on every refugee in the West for every US$1 we spend on a refugee in developing regions of the world. These differences are not always accounted for.

So why do Western states persevere with resettlement? Why is it the default means by which a country like the US supports