

When the war was over:

European refugees after 1945



Briefing Paper 6. Coming to Britain

Under the European Volunteer Workers (EVW) scheme, the British government sent officials from the Ministry of Labour to the DP camps to recruit workers in order to meet the need for labour in key occupations in industry and farming, and well as in the new National Health Service which came into being in July 1948. There were various schemes. One scheme, called 'Westward Ho!', was designed to bring DPs to work in agriculture, forestry, coal mining and cotton textiles. Another, the 'Balt Cygnets' programme, was targeted at young single women originally from the Baltic states, on the grounds (as British officials put it) that they were 'scrupulously clean in their persons and habits' and full of 'the spirit and stuff of which we can make Britons'. They were assigned to jobs in hospitals or domestic service. In all, more than 80,000 men and women came to Britain as EVWs. They received the same wages as British workers, but they could not leave their jobs without the permission of the Ministry of Labour. Furthermore, as 'aliens' they had to register with the police whenever they changed jobs or address.

These programmes were justified mainly on economic grounds. In other words, the wish to 'save' Baltic, Polish or Ukrainian DPs from Soviet communism was a secondary consideration. The government distinguished each group of DPs - Balts were highly desirable, Ukrainians much less so, and European Jews were not eligible. Latvian women in particular belonged to a category of 'sound stock' - a 'good and desirable element' whose marriage to British men could be welcomed as reproduction would ensure the maintenance of a healthy white British 'line'. The government also tried to limit the numbers of immigrants from the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean, although the 1948 Nationality Act gave them unrestricted right of entry to Britain, something that remained the case until the Act was amended in 1962.

Although the British government considered the EVWs to be economic migrants (hence 'volunteer workers'), many of the Latvian and other DPs who reached British shores regarded themselves, at least to begin with, as refugees and not very definitely - as former citizens of a vanished state. Latvians thought of themselves as belonging to the Latvian nation, which had been destroyed first by Nazi occupation and then by Soviet domination. Being labelled economic migrant did not square with the idea of their having been forcibly displaced during the war. British authorities played down this aspect of their identity. Whilst praising their 'national dignity', Latvians were commended for wishing not 'to live in a segregated group in this country, but to become part of the community here'. This corresponded to the view expressed at the time that 'kept in big groups, their

fanatic hatreds and nationalistic hopes would be built up rather than dissipated'. The aim was to 'assimilate' them in due course, and they were expected (as 'Westward Ho!' documentation put it) to 'behave as worthy members of the British community' (Salvatici, 2011). However, most EVWs had little time or energy to learn English, and some believed that it was unnecessary, because they would soon be going home.

EVWs were often perceived as hard workers. The Ministry of Labour published a brochure, *Workers from Abroad*, to explain why foreign workers were being recruited, what their background was, and what they were expected to contribute to economic and social life. Nevertheless, DPs who settled in the UK encountered hostility as well as material hardship. The *Daily Mirror*, in an article headed 'Let Them Be Displaced', captured the backlash against European Volunteer Workers in highly dismissive terms: 'Other countries had taken the cream and left us most of the scum. Some no doubt are in the Black Market. They add to our discomfort and swell the crime wave. This cannot be tolerated. They must now be rounded up and sent back'. Similarly, the *New Statesman* called for rigid selection of Ukrainians, in order 'to exclude the illiterate, the mentally deficient, the sick, the aged, the politically suspect, and the behaviourally disruptive. [We should] clear out the rubbish amongst those who have already come' (both quoted in Kay & Miles, 1992: 116-17). This rhetoric is striking not only for its contemptuous and dismissive characterisation of human beings but also for the way in which it encapsulates physical illness and mental distress, psychological disturbance and unorthodox political belief.

This series of briefing papers is based on a research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and conducted by historians at the University of Manchester and the University of Nottingham on East European population displacement and resettlement after the Second World War.

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/postwar-refugees/index.aspx>

© Copyright 2012