

Hannah Johnson Year 11
GCSE History Assignment
Question 2

Explain how the differing reactions of the British people towards the Evacuation Policy.

In 1939 the Government decided to evacuate all children from the major towns and cities.

Many people were affected by the evacuation policy. It was thought that it was just children that were the only ones but parents, both those receiving and sending children, were also affected.

Reactions differed, in children it ranged from misery of missing parents to excitement of travelling alone. Parents who were sending their children suffered from grief but also of relief of their children being safe.

Though many people's attitudes changed as the war progressed. Billetors got used to their evacuees and the parents that had sent their children away got used to a life without them to an extent.

People had very different reactions to the evacuation policy. Children saw the situation differently; normally it depended on their age and/or the way their parents reacted. Younger children didn't know what was happening and viewed it as an adventure, whereas older children knew of the war and the dangers and were more sensitive to the way their parents were feeling. Bernard Kops gives us an example of his traumatic experience: "me and my school friends assembled in the playground with our gas mask and labels tied to our coats. And then we all moved away, all the children and the parents crying."

Many children were in fear of the unknown place they were going to. A London schoolgirl stated, "Only the train driver knew the destination".

On the train many children were fearful and worried, "children wet themselves...wept for their mothers..."

Billeting officers simply lined the children up against a wall or on a stage in the village hall, and invited potential hosts to take their pick. Thus the phrase 'I'll take that one' became etched on the memory of our evacuees.

This was the first of many moments that caused upset and humiliation for the evacuees, an evacuee from a working class background stated:

"...What followed was like an auction...Nobody wanted the awkward combination of a girl of eleven and such a small boy...We were left until the very last...I sat on my rucksack and cried."

Parents' reactions were of relief that their children were safe but at the same time, they felt that they had abandoned their children into the unknown. Many actually felt nervous and scared because of the things that were happening in Europe. A thought that the majority of parents thought at that time was, "...it would be better for families to stick together and not go breaking families up"

The Women's Institute was a group who were in charge of a majority of evacuations, they were the ones that sorted children out and were surprised by the evacuees that arrived in their small towns and villages. When children arrived they were appalled by the lack of knowledge in hygiene and cleanliness the evacuees had. "...Verminous children lacking any knowledge of clean habits...not had a bath in months"

Evacuees were assembled in school halls and chosen by prospective Billetors, afterwards schools had to be fumigated as they were found infested with lice, fleas and other contagious diseases.

Many hosts were upper to middle class and most evacuees were lower class. Billetors were struck with disbelief that any child anywhere could be so oblivious to simple hygienic procedures. This becomes apparent after looking at *The World is a Wedding* by Bernard Kops, "We were given face flannels and tooth brushes. We'd never cleaned our teeth...hot water came from a tap...and clean sheets. This was all very odd."

Attitudes to accepting evacuees were affected by the ten shillings and sixpence allocated by the Government towards caring for the Evacuees. The financial problems coupled with the compulsory acceptance of evacuees made situations difficult at times. Some of children were sent without the specified personal belongings, some children only had the clothes they arrived with, one member of the WRVS in a letter dated November 1939, thanks a friend for the parcel of clothing she had sent saying "...we are so grateful, the collection the Village had raised for clothing the children has been exhausted, and they are in desperate need of warm clothes and coats. Some of the children arrived in rags". There was resentment from the children living in the rural area, they were inconvenienced by an increase in numbers at school and at home, one girl recalled "I had to share a bedroom with my brother and I hated the two evacuees who arrived from the start".

The majority of evacuated children came from the slums of large cities, Glasgow, Leeds etc. The experience of living in slums was not one that rural dwellers were familiar with, and it is documented that ninety per cent of children from Stephany, London for, instance, did not live in a house with a bath. There were in contrast, instances of middle -class children being evacuated to rural cottages and experiencing a decline in the standard of living they were used to. One thirteen year old boy recalled "After school I was expected to help Mr Benson scrub down the marble slabs in his butcher's shop, I had never been asked to help my father in his bank".

Conclusion

The main problems came from the sudden throwing together of people with widely differing standards and attitudes to life, these people in normal peacetime situations probably would not have had contact with each other. There were positive attitudes to evacuation; there are records of evacuees remembering that it was the best time of their lives, and offers from the Billetors to adopt children they had cared for. One startling aspect is that at the end of World War 2, for a variety of reasons, 38,000 children did not return home. This ensuring that the effects of evacuation have had an effect on attitudes into the 21st Century.