

Explain the differing reactions of British people to the policy of evacuation during the Second World War.

In 1939 war broke out in Europe, this was one of the first “Total Wars”. This meant almost the whole population had to get involved in the war effort to help Britain stride on throughout these dark years. No one was safe with constant threat of enemy bombing of Britain’s major towns and cities. Even the countryside children were unsafe. This is why in late August 1939, just before war broke out, evacuation was introduced throughout Britain for infants and teachers coming from major towns and cities to safe places in the countryside, far from the threat of enemy bombers. This was a massive change to how Britain functioned in the war, and it affected a lot of different people in different ways. The main five groups that were affected by evacuation were obviously the evacuees, the parents of the evacuees, the foster parents who looked after the evacuees, the teachers who were evacuated with the evacuees and the government. Lets take a look at some of the opinions that were involved in the evacuation program.

The most obvious group to be involved in the evacuation program would obviously be the evacuees. They were the ones sent away from home not knowing how long for or when they would see their parents again. Some children were too young to even know what was going on in the first place. As you can imagine the children probably did not want to be taken away from their homes and live with strangers in a strange place for an unknown time but the children had to get used to it. Many children were very home sick during the evacuation period because many had never parted from their parents previously. This was because there was no need for evacuation in previous wars but with this advanced technology war, no one was safe. Some of the children were very young so it was very difficult for them to adapt to this new way of life. In some cases, this was shown in their behaviour. Some of the children were from poorer areas of the cities and naturally they acted this way in their foster homes. They found it difficult to adjust to the strict, wealthy countryside lifestyle and it took them a while to settle in. Other children were already from richer families so the rich countryside lifestyle was not so much of a problem for them

and they settled in well. Children got the chance to make new friends and learn new things and for many, the evacuation period was a positive mind-broadening experience leaving them with memories to remember for the rest of their lives. For other evacuees, life was not as sweet, stories of children such as John Abbot who was evacuated from Bristol. He had his rations stolen by his family and was only fed mashed potatoes and was horsewhipped for speaking out loud. Or Terri McNeil who was kept in a birdcage and was left with just bread and water. Although these stories seem horrific, it was only the minority who were mistreated. As you can imagine, throughout the war children became less homesick and more a custom to their new surroundings. This is evident from a photograph released by the government in the war to increase morale showing evacuees enjoying themselves and looking very relaxed at bath time. On the whole there is a great range of opinions from former evacuees about their lives in the evacuation period. It depended on the nature of the child and the family they were staying with.

Another group who were deeply affected by evacuation were the parents of the children who were being evacuated. Of course they wanted their children to be out of harms way and in safe hands in the countryside, but obviously they did not want to part with their children because of their obvious feelings for them and in the times of fear that were upon them they would wish to be with their children. Some parents did not let their children leave them, as this was optional for the parents. These parents didn't want their children being looked after by strangers. One Southend father of a seven-year-old child gave the reason to the observer that no one would look after his son in the countryside if he were killed, but at least with him he has family or friends that he could trust to look after him well. Other parents had different views and thought that the countryside was a much safer place for their children in wartime and sent their children straight off to be evacuated when the war began. Mr E Kingston of Vansittart Road, New Cross, who saw two of his children leave on the train said, "It is the only sensible thing to do. I am not worrying." Bernard Cooke (of Cornwall Street, Victoria), proud father of Patrick Joseph who was born a week earlier said, "I am sorry to lose my wife and boy. It's my first baby, you know, but I think it's wiser that they should

go away,” Stories of heart broken mothers gripping on to their children’s hands as they were boarding the trains tell us what it was like for the parents to part their children. Some children were parted from their mothers at the age of two! The most common opinion of parents about the evacuation program was their children’s safety and so they took action to suit what they thought was the best way of keeping their children well.

The foster families who took on the evacuees obviously had their share of opinions about evacuation. In some places, due to mismatches, billeting officers simply lined the children up against a wall and invited potential hosts to come up and simply pick which one they wanted. Some of the foster parents were more than happy to take on evacuees needing homes, maybe for personal reasons for example, if a couple wanted a child this was a great opportunity to see what it was like. Many foster parents treated the evacuees as one of their own children and grew to love them like their own over the evacuation period. Other foster parents were not as content with the evacuee they were stuck with for the duration of the war. As mentioned earlier, some of the evacuees came from poverty in the city, to living with a rich family in the country. Some foster parents found this hard to cope with, with children displaying filthy habits in the foster parents homes without the children even thinking twice about it. Things like, urinating on the walls instead of the toilets was known. There were other reports of children “fouling” gardens, hair crawling with lice, and bed wetting which also did not go down well with some of the foster parents. The opinions of the foster families throughout Britain varied greatly but whether they liked it or not it was their part in the war effort.

Some teachers were even evacuated with the children to carry on with the children’s education in the evacuation period and to make sure they were being treated well enough. Some of the teachers were also obviously scared with their new surroundings but like the children and the foster parents they got used to them after a while. Many probably were not keen on leaving their homes to look after the children, but to contribute to the war effort they volunteered.

To make sure this whole evacuation process ran as smoothly as possible the government would produce propaganda to reassure worried parents that their children were safe and happy. Things like pictures of children enjoying themselves at bath time or meal times were published to boost the morale of the parents left in the big cities. A major worry for the government about evacuation was the problem that there were not enough foster homes for all the 3,000,000 evacuees that were evacuated in 1939. Posters were put up to encourage and persuade people to foster evacuees. The posters would make the people feel heroic for doing so and telling them it was doing the right thing, this seemed to work. Overall, the government stated that evacuation ran very smoothly with cooperation from everyone throughout the war.

I think that evacuation was the right thing to do because children cannot defend themselves as well from the enemy so they must be kept safe. Also knowing their children were safe boosted the morale of the people of Britain which was a key factor in winning the war. In my opinion the group of people that were affected most by evacuation were the evacuees. This is because they were the people who did not have a choice in the matter and were sent off to a strange place they had never seen before without their parents with them, and a lot of them did not even know why and for how long they would be there for. This would be a life changing experience for any young child this is why I believe that the young evacuees were affected by the evacuation program the most.

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