

Why did the British government decide to evacuate from Britain's major cities in the early years of the Second World War?

World War Two started in 1939 and lasted six years until 1945. It was the first war on British civilians with 60,000 being killed in the duration of the war. For more than a million children who lived in large industrial cities and major ports throughout the British Isles the outbreak of war meant separation from their families. These children were the most prone to bombing and so parents were urged to send their children to the countryside. Some children returned home after only a few weeks or months whilst others stayed with their foster parents in the country for the six-year duration of the war.

The government wanted to protect women and children to keep them safe for future generations and this was the one main key reason for evacuation. The Blitz posed a major threat to Britain and its civilians and the British government were well aware of the damage and civilian deaths in other Nazi invaded countries. The Blitz involved German planes bombing Britain and in particular the large industrial cities. There was constant bombing for 75 nights in a row from 7th September 1940. During one night in November Coventry was bombed for 10 hours killing 4000 civilians and destroyed one third of the buildings there. But civilians were not only affected there altogether 60,000 British civilians were killed and 2,000,000 people were left homeless in Britain. Evacuation was therefore key and necessary to protect and preserve the lives of many women and children. The main reason for keeping women and children safe was to protect the future generations of Britain once the war was over so people could return to their normal lives again and the number of civilian deaths could be kept low if there were no children and less women in the major cities that were being bombed. Subsequently the evacuation process was underway for the safety of the population and as this was essential it is a key reason why the British government decided to evacuate from Britain's major cities.

Another major reason other than safety to evacuate was to boost the morale of the workforce left behind. Evacuation was also propaganda used to boost the morale of workers. There were advertisements and posters up everywhere around towns and cities showing happy children living in the countryside, and asking parents to send their children to be evacuated. This showed the nation that the government were doing something to help the children and protecting future generations. A lot of people were also frightened about being attacked and feared for their children's lives but the fact they were being taken away to somewhere safe comforted parents and made them have feelings of hope and happiness that at least their children would be safe. Therefore boosting morale of the nation was an essential part of why the British government decided to evacuate children away from major cities in the early years of World War Two.

One of the important reasons as well as boosting morale and safety was to free up the workforce to work in munitions factories and generally do the men's job who had gone to fight. Women between the ages of 19 and 40 were conscripted into work and 7.75 million women were soon working. These women didn't have to work however if they still had children under 14. In this 7.75 million there were 300,000 working with explosives and chemicals and 1.5 million in engineering and metal work. At this time in history women had around four children in the family and it was a full time job looking after them all especially at young ages. But once these children were evacuated these mothers and housewives would have a lot more time on their hands to work in the factories and doing the jobs that the male population usually did.

Women would also be able to work longer hours and be more productive without having to work and do all the housework at home. Consequently without evacuation there would be a much lesser workforce and so this becomes a key reason for the decision to evacuate children in the early years of the Second World War.

Another advantage of evacuating children at the start of the Second World War was to give the “lower class” children in cities better opportunities and experiences of the countryside. Many inner city children couldn’t use a knife and fork, didn’t have toothbrushes, had nits and had a generally poor standard of living and poor nutrition.

“ One child was suffering from scabies and the majority had it in their hair”

Hosts were horrified to find that some children had no stouter footwear than a pair of plimsolls and hadn’t brought a change of clothes with them. Some of the fortunate children who were evacuated were given much better opportunities to learn new things and have better opportunities in their experience of the countryside. Also children could learn how to do things that weren’t possible in cities for instance learning table manners and using knives and forks. These children could experience this whole new world that they would never know of back in the cities, even fresh air was a new understanding for some children.

“ We were even given flannels and toothbrushes. We’d never cleaned our teeth up till then. And the hot water came from the tap. And there was a lavatory upstairs... This was all very odd. And rather scaring.”

But on the other hand some children were treated very badly and foster parents only took these children for the five shillings a week paid to all foster parents.

Michael Caine who was to become a famous actor remembers life as an evacuee.

“ The women said ‘ Here’s your meal’ and gave us a tin of pilchards between the two of us and some bread and water... What we later found out was that the women hated kids and was doing it for the extra money. So the meals were the cheapest you could dish out.”

Some of the children also missed the comfort of home and were afraid of all these new and unfamiliar concepts of life in the countryside. But all the children that were sent away could learn new skills and experiences from where they were sent. Some of these were good others not so good but this was still a key factor for why children were evacuated from Britain’s major cities in the early years of the Second World War.

In conclusion I believe that the most important reason for evacuation was the safety of the children. This was paramount if Britain was to have future generations after the war had ended. Children needed to be protected from the horrors of war and be there in the end to lead the new Britain once the war was over. Without this safety the war could have ended up with a lot more fatalities and casualties than were actually experienced throughout World War Two. But safety aside all the other factors contributed to why children were evacuated in the early years of the Second World War. If children were left at home there would have been less of a workforce to take up jobs in factories, most of the children would never have got the chance to experience high class living and learn new skills and morale would not have been so high if there was more deaths and fears about the safety of the children. So overall I believe evacuation was done for safety but not just safety alone all these factors contributed for why the British government decided to evacuate from Britain’s major cities in the early years of the Second World War.