

The Evacuees' Experience

During the First World War aeroplanes were used for fighting and bombing for the first time. It was feared that in the event of another war, bombers would always get through to attack ordinary people. If some of the bombs contained poison gas, an awful weapon also developed in the First World War, many men, women and children would be killed.

Fear of bombing was one reason why the British and French Governments did not stand up to Hitler in the 1930s. They disapproved of the build up of German armed forces and the invasion of Austria and Czechoslovakia, but they preferred to let Hitler have his own way rather than do anything which might provoke another war. The takeover of Czechoslovakia pushed Britain to the brink of war, but the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, believed Hitler when he promised that he would not demand any more territory in Europe. On 1 September 1939 Germany invaded Poland, shattering Chamberlain's trust. Britain and France had promised to help Poland if she were attacked, so war with Germany became inevitable.

As early as 1930 there had been talk about evacuating vulnerable groups of citizens to reduce casualties and chaos in the event of massive air attacks on cities. The Czechoslovakia crisis in 1938 increased the sense of urgency, especially in London where a plan to evacuate school children and their teachers was to begin on 30 September. The Munich agreement delayed the war for a year and stopped the evacuation, but not before 4000 children had been sent out of London. These children returned in the first week of October 1938, much having been learned from the experience of organising and carrying out the evacuation.

The European situation worsened in August 1939. Between 1 and 4 September over 600 000 children were evacuated from London. Chamberlain's broadcast announcing the outbreak of war on 3 September was followed almost immediately by the first Air Raid Warning. This was a false alarm and the dreaded air raids did not happen at this stage of the war. Because so little seemed to be happening the period was known as the "Phoney War" and evacuees began to drift back to the cities. Many people stopped carrying gas masks, despite instructions to do so. The nation was jerked back to reality the following summer. The fall of France and the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk focused the minds of many on the real possibility that Britain might be invaded and lose the war. Chamberlain lost the confidence of Parliament and was replaced by Winston Churchill who did not hide the seriousness of the situation, but who had an unshakeable conviction that Britain would survive and that Hitler would be defeated.

In May and June 1940 more children were sent out of London and those evacuated earlier to the south coast were moved to Wales, the Midlands, Surrey and Hertfordshire. Further evacuations occurred throughout 1940. The Royal Air Force kept command of the sky over the English Channel and Hitler abandoned the planned invasion of Britain. In 1941 he turned his attention eastwards to Russia, but the Luftwaffe continued to attack Britain by bombing cities at night. The "Blitz" justified the decision to evacuate the children. By 1943 the tide of the war had turned, but the arrival of the V1 flying bombs caused another evacuation from London in 1944. Evacuees returned to many cities in the winter of 1944, but London remained vulnerable and had suffered immense damage so fewer went back there. The war in Europe ended in May 1945 and by the end of July all evacuees had been brought back.