

# Recruitment schemes of Displaced Persons in Great Britain

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## -Introduction

After the Second World War the British government and the British Ministry of Labour started to evaluate a possible regulated flow of migrants from the Displaced Persons's camps in the post war Europe, especially from Germany and Austria to Great Britain. The fundamental aim of the plan was the enlargement of the manpower in all the British productive sectors, such as agriculture, coal mining, steel industry or wool crafting, but also in support to the new-born National Health Service (NHS), which were facing huge shortages of labour. The two recruitment schemes developed to satisfy these demands were "Balt Cygnet" for the NHS, and "Westward HO!" for every other sector. The Displaced Persons who wanted volunteering were named European Voluntary Workers (EVW). Both the programs provided enough workers to let the British industry recover after years of war, but the ways in which they were recruited is still debated nowadays. Indeed, even if the workers were provided with almost the same benefits of the British workers, they were considered economic migrants rather than displaced persons or refugees.

## -Balt Cygnet scheme

"Balt Cygnet" was launched in October 1946 under the direct control of the Ministry of Labour of Great Britain. The Ministry sent dozens of officials to several Displaced Persons's camps mainly in Germany and Austria, searching for optimal candidates for the programs, spreading several leaflets which briefly explained the terms and conditions of work the EVW once in Great Britain. According to the leaflets, they searched for unmarried women between eighteen and forty years of age to employ in hospitals, tuberculosis hospitals as cleaners, maids, kitchen hands and other domestic jobs, except for those who had nursing experience: in that case they had a possibility to make a request to be trained as nurses, but the acceptance was not granted. About wage, they were provided with a standard wage which was the same for British women employed in the same jobs. About the workplace, they were randomly placed in every kind of medical institution, except for sanatoria, mental institutes, which required an explicit consent of the worker. Moreover, the British Ministry of Labour made clear

that every worker had a 12-month work visa according to which they had no possibilities to choose where to work and where live without the authorization of the Ministry itself. Because of this limitation, they were forced to work in the place initially chosen for them, with very few possibilities to counter the decision. Although they were still free to reject the offer and coming back to the DP camps, it was very unusual, because it meant to come back to extreme poverty, without many possibilities to improve their life conditions or perceive earnings. The women who accepted the jobs, were provided with board and lodging in the hospitals they were going to work in, with some additions such as an ID card, a ration card for meals, and several clothing coupons for a total sixty per year. About health, in case of sickness, a little pocket of money every week was granted, but only if the condition was temporary. Indeed, in case of frequent long periods of sickness, they should have left the country, coming back to the Displaced Persons camps where they accepted the recruitment through a free for charge travel. The EVW were also provided with other benefits as well as the national workers, such as the unemployment and the health insurances, because they were liable to income tax as the British national taxpayers.

### -Working conditions for Balt Cygnet EVWs

Working conditions for those who accepted the Balt Cygnet recruitment cannot be considered easy or less demanding if compared to other categories of voluntary workers jobs. Memories about it has been reported by the British Geographer Linda McDowell, in a paper called “Narratives of family, community and waged work: Latvian European volunteer worker women in post-war Britain”. McDowell interviewed twenty-five Latvian women who joined the EVW programs, and six of them arrived in 1946 to work in Hospitals according to the Balt Cygnet scheme. As the leaflets tells, these women confirmed they should be in perfect health conditions, not pregnant and free from any dependent, from children to husband or parents. Most of them became domestic servants and cleaners in almost isolated hospitals in the rural northern areas of Great Britain without the possibility to interact with other Baltic nationals or, in some cases, anyone else. A controve point was the choice of Baltic women itself. Many of them came from a middle-class urban background and most of them were educated, they known English or had nursing experience. Because of it, the National Advisory Council on Nurses and Midwives permitted the nurse training for those kind Baltic workers. A domestic worker named Milda reported how a matron in the Hospital where she was working in, proposed her a nurse training because a consideration about her previous social class in Latvia. Another one called Marta, who worked in the kitchens of a male EVW’s camp, reported how the absence of Trade Unions where she lived made extremely difficult to work, especially considering the rights she deserved: she was forced to work almost twelve hours per day, without free

time to take a rest or enjoy her private life. The stereotypes of the time played another important role. Indeed, despite many EVW recruited had other nationalities, the Baltic ones were considered “of better quality” or “more suitable” for those jobs which required a human contact in hospitals. Workers from other nationalities, such as the Ukrainians, received less prestigious jobs, mainly cleaners and kitchen hands, and the opportunities to participate at the nurse trainings were denied. Despite all the controversies, who succeed in the nurse training discovered a totally different condition. They perceived an improvement in the social status and were able to geographically move towards the South of the Country, which for many of them guaranteed richer lives, especially in case of mixed marriages with British men.

### -Westward HO! Scheme

The Westward Ho! recruitment scheme was developed immediately after Balt Cygnet, in 1947, with the intention to employ several thousands of people, both men and women, in all British industries and productive sectors which were facing huge shortages. The actual number volunteers of Westward Ho! was estimated to be less than 80.000 people, and it was not enough compared to the attended goal of 100.000, at least, set by the Ministry of Labour. The reasons behind the launch of this second scheme were deeper than the success of the first one. First, the raising of the leaving school age shifted many young Britons from the workplaces to school classes; second, the number of British workers in pensionable age was rapidly increasing; the third reason was fundamentally a demographic evaluation. According to the quotations of the Ministry of Health in the paper of Elizabeth Stadulis named “The Resettlement of Displaced Persons in the United Kingdom” (1952), Great Britain was also facing a significant decrease in the fertility rate, 25% below the full reproductive standard in 1942, which could have led to a backlash in the number of workers in the British industry in further years, making a possible flow of immigrants unavoidable. The main element in common with Balt Cygnet scheme was the manual job proposed. Indeed, neither qualifications nor past professional backgrounds had been taken in account because in that moment the Ministry of Labour did not want to employ professionals or skilled workers instead of “basic economic assets” could improve the national productivity in crisis. Despite this general doctrine, a short number of EVW, those “who had outstanding skills or experience” were placed where they could fully use and develop their own skills. The main sectors of interest were coalmining, textile industry, agriculture, steel, transports, energy, and forestry. They were also provided with English lessons to improve their capacity to interact with British nationals, especially in workplaces. As well as for the Balt Cygnet scheme, also for Westward Ho! the Minister’s officials spread leaflets written both in English and German, which describes the kind of jobs, and the treatment conditions for the volunteers. The

conditions of work, with the 12-month visa and a standard wage were the same if compared to the Balt Cygnet scheme, with several additions about dependants, accommodation, and trade unions: although the dependants were not able to reach their relatives in Great Britain, the communication was granted by the national postal service; the accommodation were provided by the National Service Hostels Corporation (camps or hostels) and they had to pay a little charge for living there; some employers requested workers with a trade union membership only.

### -Suitability

Every Displaced Person who wanted to apply the scheme had to complete a medical form, before the medical visit, which pointed out the undesirable health conditions which made people unsuitable. It was necessary to state that they never experienced epilepsy, mental issues, or breakdowns, and that they were suitable to live with other persons. In the end there were also several specific health conditions such as: mental diseases, chronic alcoholism, “low grade intelligence”, deafness which makes communication difficult, diseases in lungs, heart, abdomen which can cause frequent incapacity, loss of greater parts of limbs, incontinence, evident pregnancy. These exceptions made possible to employ healthy and strong people only, leaving disables and persons who had been traumatized from by the war outside. Another relevant aspect is the concept motherhood, deeply analysed by McDowell in the paper previously mentioned, because the consideration of the women employed in Great Britain did not take in account the possibility of growing up a family. It was a common idea also in the British public opinion, that these people should just work and then leave, without having children and settle in the country. It did not happen.

### -Working conditions for Westward HO! EVWs

Working conditions for EVW employed according to “Westward Ho!” varied case by case. In the Textile industry they gained more appreciations compared to others, because almost all machines previously lying in idle had been put into production. Although the inexperience and difficulties in communication, many EVWs enjoyed working there. So far, once they were eligible to accept a different employment after the 12-month visa, they chose to stay in the same old industries. Indeed, a fundamental point was that the skills they developed in British Industries made them irreplaceable with new unskilled British Workers. It slowly started to be a problem for British national workers, who in some cases refused to share their knowhow because of the fear of being replaced. In coal mining the EVWs which experienced a limited training in German and Russian mines, quickly adapted their basic knowledge to the British methods and techniques: the result was a good attendance rate and a lower incident rate

compared to the British co-workers. In Agriculture the EVWs played a significant role at the beginning. Indeed, the effort to attract native labour in agriculture failed multiple times because of several factors, such as the increase in the number of students which lowered the number of young workers employed in farms and fields, or the migration out of the country. Indeed in 1949 36.000 Britons sailed for Australia to find better jobs, and EVWs successfully filled the gap in the following year. Anyway, the decline in agriculture couldn't have been stopped by the scheme, because even many EVW left agriculture after the compulsory 12 months.

## -Conclusion

In conclusion, the Recruitment Schemes of Displaced Persons in Great Britain can be considered a story of necessity and limited success, but a kind of failure around the human side. Indeed, despite the contribution these workers gave to the British economy after years of war, it is appropriate to consider the backlash the schemes produced. There were many complaints from Trade Unions regarding the difficulties of assimilating foreign workers, which were not so used to dialogue about working conditions or rights, and sometimes they did not participate to strikes fearing to act illegally. It also necessary to underline the cold reception of British people, which generally saw these workers as a possible menace for their quality of life and wage standards and for the welfare state, despite the EVWs paid taxes. They were considered sort of economic aliens, living apart from the British society, without considering the fact it was not feasible to buy private houses. Indeed, even when the dependants were allowed to reach their relatives in the country, they were forced to settle in hostels and camps because very few EVWs could afford a private accommodation. On the other hand, despite the narration gave by leaflets and advertising from the Ministry of Labour, working in Great Britain also provoked many struggles. As it is reported by EVW witnesses, mental issues and depression, the same things the British Officials wanted to avoid selecting workers for their schemes, inevitably came up once they arrived in Britain, after months of very hard work and difficulties to gain a decent life. The condition of loneliness many workers faced, working in isolated places without social life, often brought them to suicide. In the end, it is also important to underline how these schemes disconnected the Displaced Persons who joined, with the status of victims of war. They were only considered economic migrants according to Great Britain, which adopted many restrictions to their private life, that describing the schemes as a discriminating policy could be a legitimate critique.

## Bibliography

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