

'BETWEENNESS': The Lives of Latvian Women Migrants

Professor Linda McDowell, Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford, gives an account of her research into the experiences of Latvian women who came to Britain as economic migrants after the Second World War under schemes set up to import foreign labour.

ON 1 May 2004, ten new states joined the European Union, many of them long-dominated by the Soviet Union until the remarkable events of the early 1990s. Among these states are the three Baltic Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, tiny in population size and largely unfamiliar until recently to the British public which, if aware of them at all, tended to confuse them with the Balkans. But there is a long-standing connection between Britain and these states: one that has its origins in the aftermath of the Second World War and the great movements of people across Europe and beyond that were a consequence of the defeat of the Third Reich. Large numbers of people were involved in both forced and voluntary migrations. Deportees, refugees, prisoners and camp inmates crossed and recrossed parts of the European heartland during the conflict between the German and Soviet armies and as a consequence of the exchange of occupied lands between these two powers at the end of the war. At the close of the war, it has been estimated that as many as seven million people were homeless.

During World War II, the Baltic States were occupied and reoccupied by both Germany and the Soviet Union, suffering from enforced labour, deportations and, despite the Geneva Convention, conscription of young men into the army of the Third Reich during the German occupation between 1941 and 1944. In late 1944, as the Soviet Army advanced westwards, several thousand people in each of the three Baltic States decided to leave and eventually, after months and years of hardship, as labourers in the final gasp of the German war effort, as refugees and as occupants of the large displaced persons camps in the allied zones in Germany and Austria, almost 30,000 men and women from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania entered Britain as economic migrants under two schemes, rather fancifully entitled the Baltic Cygnet and Westward Ho! schemes, to import foreign labour as part of the UK Government's post-

war reconstruction efforts. The purpose of the first of these schemes, initiated in 1946, was to recruit young single women as labourers for the textile industry and as domestic help for a range of institutions including tuberculosis sanatoria and mental hospitals, as well as for private homes. On entry their status was officially transformed from that of displaced persons, exiles and refugees, into European Volunteer Workers (EVWs), as each in-migrant signed a contract to work in a designated industry for a specified number of years.

The history of the EVWs' long working lives in Britain is a largely forgotten one, and has not been recorded in the words of the participants, despite the fact that the total immigration of people displaced by the war more than doubled the foreign-born population of the UK at that time and preceded the more well-known migrations from the Caribbean. In 2000 I began a

project, funded by the British Academy's Small Research Grants scheme, to trace and interview some of the now-elderly women who had come to the UK as Cygnets or Westward Hoers. The largest group among these women from the Baltic were just over 2,000 young women from Latvia and so this was the group I decided to try to identify. A focus on these women who came as 'volunteers' provides an interesting insight into broader questions about both British immigration policy of the time and into the reconstruction of identity and community among diasporic peoples, as they challenge many conventional assumptions and distinctions in the debates about migration into the UK. It is their position as a hybrid or 'in-between' category in post-war Britain that makes them so interesting as they are a sort of 'tracer element', revealing assumptions about identity, ethnicity and ideas of nationality in the post-war decades.



European Volunteer Workers from the Baltic States queuing for their medical tests in a displaced persons camp in Hertfordshire, September 1947 (The Hulton Deutsch Collection)

The 'betweenness' or hybrid identity of these Latvia women lies in several areas. First, women were the initial migrants, entering the UK as independent single workers and not as family dependants, as is too often assumed by migration theorists; they also challenge conventional distinctions drawn in both migration theory and policy between refugees and economic migrants, as in their own eyes the displaced people were refugees and asylum seekers, but in official policy they were designated as economic migrants. Furthermore, these women were distinguishable from the other main categories of migrant workers into the UK at the time, especially those from the Caribbean and from Eire, by their class, skin colour, religion and alien status. Thus they occupied an interesting hybrid location in post-war Britain, neither (or both) refugees nor migrant workers, women but not mothers, often middle class by origin but required to accept manual employment, alien and yet European, neither black nor 'white', not local or citizens, with no previous attachments to the UK, unlike Irish and Caribbean women. They were also involuntary rather than voluntary economic migrants, unable to return to their homeland, which had indeed disappeared as an independent entity until the early 1990s when most of these former EVWs felt they were too elderly to return 'home', although they all accepted Latvian citizenship in the 1990s. Unlike Irish and Caribbean migrants, with a history of attachment to and connections with the UK, these Baltic women had ended up in Britain through an accident of history and the trauma of wartime dislocation. They were reluctant to become British, either in outlook or officially through taking citizenship and, despite the disappearance of their homeland as an independent state, they continued to wish for and organise around Latvian independence during their long 'exile'.

Their lives thus provide a fascinating comparison with other post-war migrants and an interesting study of how and why the British state chose to recruit them initially and to construct them as desirable workers. Indeed, considerable efforts were made to present these women as suitable Britons in eugenicist terms. They were, for example, described in official documents as superior to rural Polish women and as potential marriage partners



Political postcard circulated by Latvians in Britain. '23 August 1939, Stalin-Hitler Pact signed; June 1940, Soviet occupation of the Baltic States; August 1991, Independence for the Baltic States; 23 August 1995, Stalin-Hitler Pact still extant.' (Latvian Welfare Fund)

for British men. For this, and perhaps other reasons, Baltic refugees were treated rather leniently by the allies despite the Yalta Agreement under which citizens of countries by then under Soviet domination were expected to be returned to the Soviet Union. These women, therefore, also occupied an ambivalent position as post-war survivors. They had lived in German-occupied territory during the war and sometimes they or their families had been active if not willing participants in German domination. There is a complex and contested history of Baltic collaboration with the Nazis, which has resulted in the post-war period in a number of expulsions from Britain of men from the Baltic States, as well as a debate about the extent to which the young men who were conscripted by the Third Reich were 'heroes, Nazis or victims'.

These women also provide a lens into the social construction of femininity in post-war Britain, which for me, as a feminist geographer interested in changing gender divisions of labour in contemporary Britain, was my initial entry point into this work. Unlike many British women, especially those of a similar class background, these women were required to participate in the labour market in the early post-war years. There is

an interesting and expanding literature that is beginning to examine the diversity of women's lives in both the pre- and post-war decades, drawing on both historical records but especially on the testimonies of elderly women. This work documents the ways in which women's labour market participation is connected to and conflicts with their domestic responsibilities. Focusing on migrant women in the post-war period also allows an interrogation of official ideologies of femininity in the 1940s and 1950s when the mark of a 'good woman' and of domestic respectability was above all motherhood and labour market withdrawal. The lives of migrant women challenged this association. Furthermore, these women's working lives provide an insight into the opportunities for and extent of social mobility as British society began to change from the 1950s onwards. For many of them, especially those from middle class families of origin, their lives were marked by downward social mobility, in contrast to the 'native' population.

Although my initial interest lay in the UK working lives of these women, I soon found that the women to whom I talked challenged my focus and assumptions by their insistence on the far greater significance in

their lives of their flight and exile. I was forced by their testimonies to turn to theoretical and empirical debates about identity and nationality, as well as the remarkable renaissance of interest in the Second World War as some of the most traumatic events of that period are retold through the voices of the participants. New insights have been uncovered through the previously untold stories not only of diplomats and soldiers but also of refugees, camp inmates and ordinary people living in towns and cities in the territories that were occupied and reoccupied in the early 1940s. This flourishing of oral histories and biographical writing is greatly strengthening recent theoretical interests in questions about identity and memory, especially as the former Soviet Republics become independent, raising new questions about nationality and belonging, as well as about the years of the Second World War. In this new work, the particular experiences of girls and women caught up in the traumas and dislocations are now beginning to be explored, extending a history that largely has tended to neglect the specificities of gendered experiences.

At the centre of my research, therefore, are the voices of elderly Baltic women, originally recruited as EVWs. I have collected oral narratives from 25 women, now in their seventies and eighties, who fled from Latvia in 1944 in the face of the advancing Russian front. Women from Latvia were the majority among the women from the Baltics who became EVWs and continue to be perhaps the most well-organised as a community in the UK. Latvians who decided to leave escaped by ship, landing in Danzig (now Gdansk in Poland) and journeyed westwards by train or on foot through the winter of 1944/45 which was one of the most severe of the century. The story of one of these Baltic crossings, and in a larger sense the suffering of ethnic Germans and other displaced persons from German occupied territories during World

War II and its immediate aftermath, has recently, and somewhat controversially, become the subject of a novel by Günter Grass, *Im Krebsgang* (*Crabwalk*) but relatively little has been written about the 1944 migration from the Baltic States, and in particular about the experiences of young women in this movement. Even less is known of their experiences as workers in the German war-effort, although here too there has been new interest in the questions of forced labour, stimulated in part by the reparations made to slave and involuntary labourers by the German state since 2000.

Those women and girls who survived the journey across German-occupied territories usually ended up in displaced persons camps in the British, French or US zones, sometimes after a period of forced labour for the Nazis. Their tasks ranged from sorting coal, through manufacturing munitions to street cleaning. In the camps, they also undertook a range of manual jobs, as well as clerical labour. I have explored the trauma and dislocation of the flight, and their lives as labourers both for the Third Reich and later in allied-run camps. Between 1946 and 1948, these women were recruited by officials from the British Ministry of Labour who selected fit young and single women with no dependants, to fill labour vacancies Britain. Hit by shortages, despite demobilisation, the British state decided, despite trade union opposition, to look elsewhere for workers to replace the older workers and women who withdrew from employment in 1945. It was assumed by the Government that women would be less unacceptable to the male-dominated union movement than men (although men were in fact recruited under the second scheme *Westward Ho!* and in total in larger numbers than women: more than three times as many Latvian men than women, for example, entered as EVWs). As many women were initially recruited into forms of employment with tied housing, it was also argued that

these migrant workers would not compete with British families for scarce accommodation.

Once these women had completed their required period as tied labourers, they were allowed to stay in the UK and enter other forms of work, although a surprising number of them remained in similar occupations over their lifetime. Women who had been recruited to work in the Lancashire and Yorkshire textile industry tended to be particularly immobile both spatially and occupationally, whereas the young women who initially undertook manual domestic work in hospitals were often able to train as nurses. In the monograph resulting from this research I attempt to bring together the key debates that these women's lives illuminate. These include feminist debates about the social construction of femininity, debates about migration, transnationalism and diasporic identities, and recent work in both the social sciences and the humanities about social and collective memories, the nature of narrative and the construction and reconstruction of national identities. With Latvia's entry into the European Union, a new generation of young women seem set to follow their grandmothers into the same types of low-skilled, female-dominated sectors of the labour market in the UK, still marked by shortages. How their lives will mirror and differ from those of their predecessors is a question that might also repay investigation.

[Professor McDowell has written numerous articles arising from her research, and her book entitled *Hard Labour: The Forgotten Voices of Latvian Migrant 'Volunteer' Workers* is published by UCL Press \(2005\).](#)

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