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Defining Boundaries : European Volunteer Worker women in Britain

WENDY WEBSTER

'Not a day passes but English families are ruthlessly turned out to make room for foreign invaders ... Out they go to make room for Rumanians, Russians and Poles ... It is only a matter of time before the population becomes entirely foreign'.[1] It was in advocating the control of Jewish immigration to Britain that William Gordon imagined English families under threat in a speech in the House of Commons in 1902. The image of an England under siege by foreigners has been common to many advocates of immigration control directed against particular groups in the twentieth century. Enoch Powell's notorious 'rivers of blood' speech in 1968 used similar imagery in advocating further restrictions on black and Asian immigration. Threats of invasion were imagined in terms of a breaching of internal frontiers -- families, homes, neighbourhoods, streets. In the late 1940s and 1950s the focus on 'miscegenation' in discourses on immigration, foregrounding fears about relationships between black men and white women, indicates how far the invasion of England was imagined through the figure of a white British woman.

This article explores the significance of gender to the policing of internal frontiers through a consideration of the history of European Volunteer Workers (EVWs) in Britain. Their recruitment to the British labour force from displaced persons camps in Germany and Austria under a government scheme in the late 1940s meant that EVWs were denied refugee status – a denial enshrined in their naming as ‘Volunteer Workers’. This was a term which also merged into one category a group which, despite a common experience of enforced displacement, was otherwise diverse. Predominantly from Eastern Europe,

EVWs included a range of nationalities -- chiefly Polish, Ukrainian, Yugoslavian, Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian -- in a scheme which was later extended to recruit Sudeten Germans and Austrians. Although the majority were men recruited into mining, agriculture and textiles, 21,434 women came to Britain under this scheme -- mainly to work in the textile industry in Lancashire and West Yorkshire. In contrast to Jewish, black and Asian migrants to Britain, EVWs were portrayed by the government as ‘suitable’ and ‘ideal’ immigrants.

European Volunteer Workers have generally received little attention in literatures on 'race' and immigration, although recently there have been a number of important studies which consider their significance in the history of British immigration policy after 1945.[2] They have received even less attention in literatures on gender, where there has been a general neglect of the history of white female migrants’ participation in the British labour market and its significance. In women’s history of the post-war period, the recruitment of Italian women, as well as EVWs, to work in the textile industry in the late 1940s and early 1950s has gone virtually unmentioned. This article explores the significance of gender to the notion of the ‘suitable immigrant’. Reviewing the position EVWs occupied on a borderline between all those considered 'undesirable immigrants' and dominant white ethnicities in Britain, it looks at the ways in which the boundaries of national belonging were gendered as well as raced in the period. It draws on oral testimonies from women who were recruited under the EVW scheme and from those who came to Britain under the Polish Resettlement Scheme -- collected as part of the Bradford Heritage Project and the Kirklees Sound Archive -- to look at EVW women's narratives,

their emphasis on the formation of national communities in Britain, and their definitions of the boundaries of belonging.

'Suitable immigrants'

Linda Colley has traced the history of the ways in which Britishness has been defined against a range of others beyond its shores.[3] Britishness was also defined against a range of internal others. Before 1945 black and Asian people were generally imagined as contained and controlled elsewhere -- in an empire under British colonial rule -- and it was mainly against white groups that racisms were articulated in relation to internal others. Recent work on whiteness has shown the extent to which nineteenth century representations of Jewish and Irish people were racialised, with *Punch* running a cartoon in 1862 which portrayed the Irish as 'the missing link: a creature manifestly between the gorilla and the negro', and many representations showing them as simianised and degenerate.[4] A series of Aliens Acts from 1905, designed to restrict 'undesirable immigrants', were directed mainly against Jewish immigration, although the Coloured Alien Seamen Order of 1925 effectively converted many African and Indian seamen into aliens by stipulating that they must register as aliens unless they could produce documentary proof that they were British subjects.[5] Anti-alienism continued after 1945 with anti-Jewish riots in many British cities in 1947.

EVWs were formally aliens under the Aliens Act of 1905 and its successors, and covered by their provisions as, for example, in the requirement that they reported to the

police when they changed occupation or address. In this sense, their situation was in contrast to that of black and Asian migrants to Britain, who had free right of entry as British subjects before the Immigration Act of 1962. Despite their legal position, however, and in direct opposition to the notion of ‘undesirable immigrants’ in the Aliens Act, EVWs were officially characterised as 'suitable immigrants'. This phrase was widely used in the late 1940s, and usually with main, sometimes exclusive, reference to EVWs. 'Without the aid of suitable immigrants', a leader in *The Times* suggested in February 1947, 'a serious deficiency of mobile and adaptable workers cannot be avoided in years to come'. Under the headline 'an essential import', it argued the case for recruiting EVWs because of shortages of labour in particular industries.[6] The Royal Commission on Population echoed the phrase in its 1949 Report, using it like *The Times* to characterise EVWs as 'the main source of immigrants under the present schemes', although also discussing the possibilities of immigration from Holland and Italy, as well as continued immigration from Ireland.[7] EVWs were described in a 1947 parliamentary debate as 'ideal immigrants', and as 'first-class people, who if let into this country would be of great benefit to our stock', whose love of freedom signalled 'the spirit and stuff of which we can make Britons'.[8]

This notion of the 'suitable' or 'ideal immigrant', embracing as it did a range of Europeans, including Irish, suggests some shift in the others against which Britishness was defined. The idea of British society as homogeneous was invoked to cast all 'immigrants' as outside the boundaries of nation, but the notion of 'suitability' also signalled the idea of a hierarchy of belonging. This hierarchy made plain how far black

and Asian people from British colonies and former colonies who were formally British subjects were regarded as 'aliens' in the context of British immigration policy. Within the empire they had signified British power and supremacy in the world, but as 'immigrants' to the metropolis they became a 'colour problem' and a threat to Britishness. But the EVW scheme also excluded Jews, and thus represented a continuation of the policies enshrined in the 1905 Aliens Act. It is possible that some war criminals gained entry to Britain under this scheme, but few Jewish people were amongst those recruited. A Foreign Office memorandum instructed that 'the situation in Palestine, and anti semitics (*sic*), clearly prevent the recruitment of Jews'.[9] As Tony Kushner's work has shown: 'In the late 1940s, the British state placed Jewish survivors in the displaced persons camps at the bottom of its desirability lists at a time when it was recruiting labour from this source on a massive scale'.[10]

Within the notion of EVWs as 'suitable immigrants' gendered definitions were produced against dominant white ethnicities in Britain and also against black. EVWs were recruited in a context where the British government faced the task of post-war reconstruction in a situation of virtual bankruptcy, heavy dependence on American loans, severe labour shortages and what was seen as a population crisis. A determination to maintain British power and influence in the world ran through various strategies developed, and EVW recruitment offered some partial resolution to contradictions in three of these: a move to recruit labour from abroad, pronatalism, and the encouragement of British emigration to New Zealand, Canada and Australia. EVW men were preferred to men from colonies and former colonies in part because, unlike black migrants, they were

not associated with a threat of 'miscegenation' and, as people who were regarded as assimilable in Britain, they were seen as a way of resolving the conflict between a labour shortage and encouragement of emigration. EVW women provided a resolution to the conflict between pronatalist prescriptions for indigenous women and the shortage of womanpower, and were preferred over women from colonies and former colonies because they were seen as better workers.

Although favoured over all those who were regarded as 'undesirable' -- whether Jewish, black or Asian -- the terms on which EVWs were recruited subordinated them to dominant white ethnicities in Britain. The preference for EVWs was in part because, as aliens employed on a contract basis, their labour could be controlled and, if unsatisfactory, they could be deported. They thus provided a flexible labour force which could be directed into particular industries. In the context of acute labour shortage in post-war Britain this meant that they were recruited to low-pay and low-status work which did not attract sufficient indigenous labour. Despite official definitions, many faced hostility as foreigners on arrival in Britain from fellow-workers, neighbours and local communities. Trade union fears that EVWs would be used to undercut wages had led to the negotiation of union agreements with employers which restricted the proportion of EVW workers -- in the textile industry to 10% in any mill, and sometimes in any section of any mill. Despite this they were frequently regarded as 'foreign workers' who threatened the conditions and livelihood of indigenous workers.[11] At the same time, as one Polish woman observes, such hostility could be tempered by some measure of agreement between official and popular discourses about a hierarchy of belonging in

Britain : 'Later on I think what helped us a lot was the new influx of the immigrants from Pakistan. We were more established than the immigrant from Pakistan, from Jamaica and from India. So we were sort of forgotten, we were blending into background and it was much, much easier for us then'.[12]

Internal frontiers

In the 1950s, internal frontiers defined in response to black migration to Britain included neighbourhoods, streets and homes, in a range of anxieties and hostilities towards 'blacks next door'.[13] But in the late 1940s the central frontier in such concerns was already apparent -- the white British woman. It was a fear of 'miscegenation' -- always strongly gendered as black men threatening white femininity -- which was at the heart of concerns about immigration.

The national role of the white British woman had been defined since the late nineteenth century as motherhood, for it was assumed that Britain could do the work of an imperial nation only by keeping numbers up, and preferably numbers of sufficient quality.[14] In the late 1940s concerns to maintain British power and influence in the world, sharpened by Indian independence in 1947, coincided with fears of a declining population to produce a pervasive pronatalism. The Beveridge Report of 1942 stated : 'In the next thirty years housewives as Mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world'.[15] Winston Churchill, who set up the Royal Commission on Population in 1944, argued that for Britain 'to

maintain its leadership of the world and survive as a great power that can hold its own against external pressure, our people must be encouraged by every means to have larger families'.[16]

Women's national role as mothers involved the policing of internal frontiers through control of their sexuality and procreation. Fears of 'miscegenation', surfacing in the metropolis in the first half of the twentieth century were about 'tainting the race' -- the headline of a newspaper article of 1906 which referred to the results of interracial mixing between white British women and Chinese seamen who had settled in London and other ports as 'swarms of half-bred children to be seen in the district'.[17] The Chief Constable of Cardiff's proposal of a legal ban on 'miscegenation' in 1929 referred to the employment of African and Indian seamen and resulting settlement in ports like Cardiff and Liverpool. Although interracial sex was never made illegal there were strong fears of the way in which this would pollute and taint 'the race', which were extended during the Second World War as black British and American soldiers served in Britain. Children who were the product of an interracial union, although they might be formally British, were regarded as a threat to Britishness.

Such fears were central to immigration policy after 1945. The Royal Commission on Population stated :

> Immigration on a large scale into a fully established society like ours could only be welcomed without reserve if the immigrants were of good human

> stock and were not prevented by their religion or race from intermarrying with the host population and becoming merged in it.[18]

As Bill Schwarz argues: 'In the England of the 1940s and 1950s the language of miscegenation was the central issue in terms of white perceptions of race, defining the boundaries of England and signifying the inviolate centre which could brook no impurity'.[19] The 'inviolate centre' in imaginings about the nation, and what threatened it, was inhabited by a white British woman. If the possibility of black migration to Britain brought a fear of the collapse of the boundaries between colonisers and colonised, black and white, it was particularly through the breaching of this internal frontier that such a collapse was imagined.

The EVW man, although mainly wanted as a flexible and mobile worker was a 'suitable immigrant' at least in part because, unlike the black man arriving in Britain, he was not seen as threatening the contamination and tainting of 'the race'. The possibility that he might intermarry with white British women was even canvassed as a positive aspect of EVW recruitment, recommended in a parliamentary debate in 1947 in these terms:

> We are suffering from the falling birth-rate of the late 20's and 30's and have no fewer than 200,000 numerically surplus women. I believe that is an unfortunate sociological factor ...On the assumption that we should take

> mainly single men, there are the strongest possible reasons for having an infusion of vigorous young blood from overseas at the present time.[20]

Thus the EVW man, although subordinate to dominant white ethnicities in Britain, was constructed as superior to black men, because at worst he did not threaten to 'taint the race' and at best he could play a positive role in facilitating pronatalism.

In this proposed solution to the falling birth-rate what was envisaged was not an EVW woman boosting the population through her own reproduction, but a white British woman bearing children by an EVW man. The EVW woman, however, was also recruited to facilitate the national role of white British women -- through meeting part of the demand for labour in low-paid and feminised areas of employment, freeing indigenous women to concentrate on familial and domestic life. At a time when campaigns were attempting to attract indigenous women into the textile industry, such recruitment provided a way of resolving a conflict between pronatalist government policies and the need for female labour. Thus although the most important characteristic of indigenous women as defined by a range of pronatalist literatures was their capacity to bear children, the most important characteristic of EVW women was their capacity to work. The criteria of suitability in selection procedures in displaced persons camps were the same for women as for men and focused on what were seen as the characteristics of good workers -- able-bodiedness, health and youth.

In 1948, when the image of the white British woman as war-worker had long since faded, the EVW woman was represented for a brief moment as an exemplary worker engaged in promoting the export drive through her efforts in the textile industry. She was conjured by *The Times* in January 1948 in commenting on the success of the EVW scheme: 'Here and there a newcomer, not long out of the training period, has headed the output for the week in her section of the mill'.[21] She was a figure lauded by the *Yorkshire Post*, later in the same month, whose 'eagerness to help forward the output drive is an example to the rest of us'. Under the headline 'women who plead to work harder' and illustrated by a picture of Ukrainian women EVWs working in the spinning department of a Yorkshire textile mill, the article dealt with the issue of EVW overtime. Mr. Carter, their employer, contrasted the commitments of indigenous women whose paid employment was necessarily restricted by their family life with the role of EVW women as workers: 'These women are used to working very much longer hours in their own country. They have no husbands to cook for in the evenings, no children to wash and put to bed, and as they live in a hostel their shopping, cooking and cleaning is done for them'.[22]

It was thus particularly through their identity as workers that EVW women were defined against indigenous women. Although there were also campaigns to recruit indigenous female labour in the late 1940s, especially into textiles, these stressed the temporary nature of their employment, and pronatalist policies targeted indigenous women as primarily wives and mothers. An identity as a low-paid and low-status worker -- albeit shared with many indigenous working-class women -- was part of the way in

which female subordinate white ethnicities were constructed in relation to dominant white ethnicities, and one which EVW women shared with Irish women whose recruitment to the British labour market before 1945 had included work which supported indigenous women's family and domestic life directly -- through domestic service. It was also an identity shared with black women who were recruited in the late 1940s and 1950s -- notably to the National Health Service. Thus both black and white migrants were defined against indigenous women as workers rather than mothers. It is perhaps significant that EVW women's superiority to black women was constructed at least in part through reference to their identity as workers. In 1948 -- the same year that EVW women were acclaimed as exemplary workers in textile factories -- a government working party looking into the possibility of recruiting colonial labour into the textile industry reported that it was: 'unlikely that West Indian women could stand up to the Lancashire climate for any length of time ... (and) ... it was understood that most of the women available were illiterate and thus unlikely to make suitable textile operatives'.[23]

Narratives of community

In narratives by women who came to Britain as EVWs -- collected as part of the Bradford Heritage Project -- stories are told at the prompting of questions from an interview schedule, and generally develop a chronological narrative starting with childhood, and moving to war experiences, displaced persons camps and arrival in Britain. In most cases the parts of these narratives which concern life in Britain speak of voluntary work which was far from that envisaged under the title 'European Volunteer

Workers' -- forging national communities often based around the foundation and organisation of churches and clubs. Family life in Britain is another important theme and strongly linked to the story of communities in accounts of children's involvement in organisations run from churches and clubs, including Saturday schools for language teaching, youth organisations, summer holiday camps, dancing troupes and choirs. Thus many women, when questioned on life in Britain, displace attention away from the identity assigned to them in British discourses of nation -- as immigrant workers -- to focus on family and community.[24]

In narratives of community, the story is chiefly about sharing, support and the sense of belonging which was possible through the formation of community groups in Britain based on common language, culture and religion. But the 'we' which threads its way through these narratives also signals a sense of belonging to an 'imagined community' of nation -- Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian -- and many are strongly informed by a sense of exile and speak of a longing to return home. As a Polish woman who had been deported to Siberia by the Soviet Union, and who made her way to Britain via Iran and Palestine records: 'I would have gone back on foot ... but not to a Communist country'.[25] Such narratives suggest a strong identification with community in both senses and the value assigned to a traditional gender role in family-centred and domestic work -- embroidering traditional costumes for national dancing, cooking traditional food, preparing for celebrations of Christmas and Easter -- and in community work in organisations where women were involved principally in teaching children at Saturday

schools, organising food and, through the work of women's organisations, in visiting elderly members of the community and other forms of social work.

Some women who were recruited as EVWs had ended the war in displaced persons camps as a result of a flight westwards to escape the advance of Russian forces, and others as a result of German occupation of their countries and subsequent deportation to Germany as enforced workers. Many had experienced Soviet or German occupation during the war -- in some cases successive occupations, first by Russia and then by Nazi Germany. While some Polish women who had been deported to Germany as enforced workers arrived in Britain as EVWs, others who had been deported to Siberia by the Soviet Union came as part of the Polish Resettlement Scheme. Released under the 1941 Amnesty, their route to Britain was via refugee camps in Iran, Palestine, Pakistan, India and East Africa. Thus women were negotiating identities in Britain not only in relation to the role assigned them as workers and the racism they experienced in Britain, but in relation to wartime experiences of loss, -- of home, family, health, personal possessions. Themes of family and community suggest the importance of reclaiming resources against their loss through dispossession and displacement, and allow for a more positive construction of lives in which loss is such a major theme, stressing women's active role in reconstructing their lives after the war.

A characteristic feature of deportation narratives are an emphasis on capture in a sudden raid at night, conveying shock and chaos and the loss of any order or stability.[26] A

Polish woman who arrived in Britain as an EVW having ended the war in a displaced persons camp after deportation to Germany at the age of fourteen records:

> When I was fourteen I was taken to Germany from Poland -- at two o'clock in the morning. They threw me, without shoes -- and I was shouting 'Dad', I say, 'I have no shoes'. But he didn't get my shoes, he got my auntie's shoes... 'You can nothing take!' German police, smashed the window, smashed the door and then: 'Get dressed!' They took my father, my sister, my brother, my aunt. We stay in lager. My mum tried to get in touch with us.[27]

A Ukrainian woman who also arrived in Britain as an EVW from a displaced persons camp after deportation to Germany at the age of fifteen records:

> The police come in at night and just -- always do like that, everybody's going to bed to sleep. Then after they go into the house and they catch everybody because the more young try to escape from there, they don't want to go into Germany, but in the night-time they come and they catch them like that. So they take me...[28]

The word ‘nothing’ recurs in the narrative of a Polish woman recruited as an EVW, who was deported to Germany in 1942, conveying the extent of her loss:

> I have to work from early morning, 5 o'clock, sometimes to 11 o'clock at night, and the work was very, very, very hard, and they dress us in rags, because I had nothing with me. They catch me without nothing and I had nothing with me, and even if my mother pass me on our stair she never recognise this as her own child, because we just dress in rags.[29]

In such narratives, conveyed here in particular by the notion that even her mother would no longer recognise her, the loss is of a former sense of self, bound up with family and community and, since deportees were often in their early teens, with childhood.

Most narratives do not offer a conventional theme tracing a development from childhood to maturity. Rather deportation marks a sudden break. A Polish woman who came to Britain under the Polish Resettlement Scheme after deportation to Siberia at the age of ten records:

> I remember Christmas or Easter or Sunday they (family) always come our house or we going to their house and we have like a party. We have food, drink and children was playing outside. That was very beautiful memory, what I remember up to 10th of January.[30]

Childhood is not always contrasted to the brutality of deportation. It is often recalled as a time of very hard work, especially by those growing up on farms. For a woman from Eastern Ukraine there are memories of the 1930s famine following forced collectivisation

of farms under Soviet occupation.[31] But deportation, conveyed here by a date, -- the 10th January -- often marks the end of a childhood sense of self that was associated with belonging.[32]

If the 10th of January is one watershed in the narrative of the Polish woman deported to Siberia, another is the day that she leaves Russia for a refugee camp in Tehran:

> We have a lot of food in the tent in that camp. We have a lot of rice, a lot of lamb and lot of fruit -- figs, oranges, they tried to give us everything what they can. That's what I can say. That's our hell, it's finished because we left the Russia, we're not been any more starvation. And from Tehran that was during the war we been travelling like a refugee people.[33]

Her arrival in Britain is also articulated by comparison with Russia:

> After the hell when I have been in Russia you know all the time all starvation, everything, when I come to England and I see everything is different I have a piece of bread. I'm not starving any more.[34]

However, she also records of her arrival in Britain :

> From beginning they treat us not really good. They treat us like a second-class citizen. Sometimes they ask us why we not back to Poland. I say if we have a free Poland we can back to Poland, but up to now we not going back to Poland because our country's still occupied by Russia ... And the people treat us not very nicely because there's quite a lot of English people that doesn't like to accept foreigners in England at that time. And they treat us not really nice from the beginning.[35]

While most narrators are concerned to distinguish between wartime experiences and early life in Britain, there is a continuity of imagery which suggests ways in which Britain was experienced as a place of continuing exile. This continuity is particularly apparent in the use of the word 'nothing'. It recurs in a number of narratives to characterise experiences of dispossession and particularly deportation. 'You can nothing take!' 'I had nothing with me, they catch me without nothing and I had nothing with me'.[36] But 'nothing' is also used to characterise arrival in Britain: 'We come in England, there was nothing'; 'When we came we had nothing'; 'I have nothing to give, I'm only refugee. I have nothing'.[37]

Ambivalence about arrival in Britain is characteristic of many narratives. Britain is defined in relation to ‘home’ as a European country which is reasonably near home – a suitable place from which to return when the political situation had changed. Britain also meant 'not Russia' -- as in the Polish woman's narrative -- a meaning echoed by EVWs who had a different experience of deportation and for whom it was 'not Germany': 'Oh, I

can't complain in England. When we come from Germany so bad, was very bad, everything, so when you come to England you be thinking like Heaven, isn't it?'[38] But although England may be Heaven by comparison with Germany, this account continues:

> I didn't go much out because we didn't earn a lot. We earned very little you know, when we get little money, you want to save, save for something to buy clothes ... We wanted to look same like English people. We don't want to be different. Nobody go out when have not nice clothes ... We try not to look different because you know, English people didn't like us so much.[39]

In the narrative of the Polish woman who wore her auntie's shoes when she was deported to Germany, the theme of loss of education extends from the German occupation of Poland, through deportation and displaced person camp to her arrival in Britain:

> I was always unlucky with learning. When I was only eleven the war start, so I had only four years elementary school. But later on we had private, we paid the teacher to learn private. And they took that teacher and put him in prison and that teacher later on died. So we didn't go to school at all. Then they took me to Germany when I was fourteen. After the war I had a chance to go learning sewing and dressmaking. I had been there for about four weeks and I -- everything had gone well and I was so happy with it. And in the meantime we already put our name down for going to England to work -- a few girls. And then he came and said 'how many people

> signed to go to England? You go to see the doctor, have injection, and in a week's time you are ready to go to England'. So any school was finished. Then later, when we were in England, the hostel opened evening classes ... In September there were thirty-eight of us, and at Christmas time there were only five of us. It was really sad. You could learn so much -- I've been doing very well and the teacher said: ' I feel sorry for you, I know you want to work hard and learn'. I never, ever have a chance to learn, I was always unlucky. But you see after you got married, had a child. There is better chances now to learn English.[40]

The Polish woman whose narrative of deportation emphasises that she was 'without nothing' continues this theme in her narrative of life in England. Meeting an English woman in the street who has befriended her, she is embarrassed because she is wearing a coat made from a blanket. The woman encourages her to learn English but, she records:

> But you see I think these people have the best intentions, but I was just think it take too much, what can I give in return, I have nothing to give. I'm only refugee. I have nothing and feel like Cinderella, and I think I have to look for something else ... I have nothing to give.[41]

Her narrative suggests that this continuing sense of dispossession and displacement could be intensified by the aftermath of trauma:

> First when I came I used to shivering and shaking when I saw policemen, English policemen, I had goosepimple. I was shaking, because I was beat up by Gestapo when I was in Poland, I was beat up.[42]

This theme is also apparent in the narrative of an Hungarian woman who was recruited as an EVW after fleeing westwards with her family:

> The first few years for us here in England was a very, very difficult time for us. For one thing due to our war experiences we've been very, very frightened of everything new and everything strange ... You withdraw into yourself and you view the whole world round you with suspicion.[43]

Despite the continuity of imagery in narratives of deportation and of arrival and early life in Britain, family life and community emerge as resources which could be recreated in Britain. Women record how they organised initially to get clothes and housing, emphasising the importance of collectivity for physical as well as emotional survival. The Polish woman whose loss of education could not be remedied in Britain pooled resources with other female EVWs to buy clothes:

> When we came we had nothing. We need shoes, we need clothes. So some girls said, 'I give you a pound so you can get a coat. You save your pound and the other three girls will give you a pound, so you've got four pounds and can buy a coat'. So she has a coat this week, and the next week it's

another girl's turn. So we keep sharing so that we could buy something when someone really needed something, You help each other, that's how we managed.[44]

A Ukrainian woman records how important her community was in securing housing: It was all very scarce for room to live, but we Ukrainian people, we stick together, keep together, and help together. Help each other -- they always help me when I have no house.[45]

In many communities, including Latvian, Polish and Ukrainian, initial initiatives taken to organise national communities in Britain were quickly formalised in the creation of churches and clubs. The emphasis of many of these was on maintaining religious and secular traditions which looked back to a pre-Soviet Latvia or Ukraine, and a relatively fixed version of national identity which was generally anti-Communist and anti-Soviet. One Ukrainian woman who was a member of the Anglo-Soviet society records the way in which this distanced her from other members of the Ukrainian community in Bradford. Unusually, she traces divisions within the community to the history of the war, and identifies herself against those Ukrainians in Bradford who had collaborated with the Nazis under occupation.[46]

Many women's narratives, however, although they may develop themes about divisions within their communities -- usually religious -- emphasise the value they assigned to the maintenance of national traditions. At the same time, the work of

organising communities involved the construction of new versions of national identities -- Polishness, Ukrainianness or Latvianness in Britain. Where a main emphasis in narratives of deportation and of arrival in Britain was on national identity as 'not Russian' or 'not German' and the maintenance of traditions which looked back to a pre-Soviet nation, the construction of Polishness, Ukrainianness or Latvianness in Britain emphasised the way in which it was not English. A number of narratives, for example emphasise the importance of ensuring that children did not speak English at home. An Ukrainian woman records:

> When they came from English school home they start to speak to me English. I ... er ... I always refuse to answer and I say I don't understand what you say, so they ... even now they have to speak to me in Ukrainian ... 'I'm a Ukrainian mother and you are a Ukrainian son of mine and you have to talk to me in Ukrainian language'. And that I believe...I believe strongly in that, you know, so they should know the mother's tongue … I think if you lose your language you lose your nationality, that's what I think ... language I think is the heart of your nationality when everything is the language.[47]

'If I don't help myself, no-one else will'

The emphasis on the formation of national communities in Britain could be viewed as, in part, a response to the ways in which oral history projects are structured.

The Bradford Heritage Archive, for example, calls this section of its project 'European communities' while Kirklees Sound Archive has a section on ‘The Polish Community’. In search of information about such communities in Britain, the schedule of questions prompts narrators to speak about their participation in churches, clubs or other organisations and to reflect on the value they attached to this participation. A number of the Ukrainian narrators belong to the same women's organisation, and this may well result in shared ideas and values which make for similarity in these parts of their narratives.[48] Since an obvious source of recruitment of narrators for such projects is the organisations which they are then invited to discuss, the notion of community and its importance is reinforced, while the stories of those who did not participate, or who were excluded, are not represented.

Moreover, people who are contacted in West Yorkshire are more likely to be able to produce a story about community organisation because of the demand for migrant labour in this area immediately after the war. EVW women in particular were concentrated in West Yorkshire and Lancashire because the majority were recruited to the textile industry.[49] The possibility of forming community organisations in Britain was less likely for those recruited to other occupations -- for example the women from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania who formed the first contingent of EVWs, and were set to work in tuberculosis sanatoria sited in isolated places where residence was usually a requirement. A greater diversity of narratives might emerge from an oral project specific to EVW history which looked at a wider range of areas and occupations in which EVWs were located on arrival in Britain.

One narrative allows for some consideration of the different ways in which women negotiated identities in Britain. This is by the daughter of a Latvian surgeon who ended the war in a displaced persons camp having joined her sister and her aunt who had fled to Austria to escape the Russian advance, and was recruited as an EVW in 1948. She speaks of an identification as English, emphasises the importance of individual determination for survival rather than collective organisation and identifies paid employment in Britain as an important route to such self-help. The theme is particularly apparent in reflecting on her decision to divorce her Latvian husband when he was violent towards her: 'I thought if I don't help myself no-one else will'.[50] Thus while most narratives suggest the extent to which the importance of family and community ties was strengthened rather than weakened by life in Britain, there may have been a range of ways of negotiating identities.

This Latvian narrator threads the theme of individual initiative through her narrative. In the displaced persons camp she records going on the black market to get a bit extra for clothes -- selling watches, jewellery and cutlery. Her story of arrival in Britain, speaking of her reaction to her role as textile worker emphasises her determination to succeed in it:

> I couldn't even imagine you know what a mill looked like really, and as soon as I walked in -- you know all your eyelids were full of cotton and it was terrible dust and noise. And I thought -- my God! ... I was ready to go

> back. But then I thought, well, I decided for myself to come over here, and if other people can do this job, definitely I can do it. So I make my mind up that I was determined to do the job, which I did.[51]

Despite her status in Latvia as the daughter of a surgeon, she identifies employment in mills and factories as an important route to such self-help, and her story details advance in a subsequent job from operative to charge-hand to forewoman where 'at one time I had 120 girls under me'. When asked about her contacts with the Latvian community she suggests the priority given to employment over community : 'I didn't really bother. I had no time to bother'.[52]

The extent to which this narrator does not identify with Latvians in Britain is apparent from her use of pronouns when she refers to the community as 'they'. 'Really the Latvian language is only for sentimental reasons', she records, after telling how she decided to stop sending her son to Saturday school on the advice of a British teacher who suggested that this was not helping him in English. Nor does she have any desire to return to Latvia:

> I think it's very hard living over there and I wouldn't like to go back. Like some people -- elderly people -- keep saying: 'If Latvia would be free I would just walk over'. I wouldn't. Everything has been changed and it's not the same. I was only young when I left, so why should I start a life from the beginning again? I'm too old. And I don't think the young ones would

> do either. They've been used to a different life ... Why should they go over there and start from the beginning just because that's your own country'.[53]

Her recognition here that the imagined community to which others long to return is irrecoverable, is coupled with a shift towards English in her national identification.

> I know I'm a foreigner but I don't feel like one. And I keep telling them (English friends) as for a joke: 'Oh I'm only a foreigner what do you expect?' So they say 'What are you talking about, we don't classify you any more as a foreigner. *Do you feel quite English?* Yes. I do everything English way more or less.[54]

This narrative is unusual in shifting towards an identification as English. But other women's senses of identification and belonging also shifted and changed in different contexts. While some continued to long to return, the acknowledgement that the nation they imagined in exile was irrecoverable, even in a post-Soviet context, is common to a number of narratives. And through their family and community life, some record a growing sense of belonging in Britain:

> I think it's so many years out of the Poland that's my opinion. I feel like that. I'm not belong any more there because everthing's so many years. Thirty-nine years in England. I feel like I belong here because our children is born here, educate here, and our grandchildren is here.[55]

> I've not feeling of not belonging here. I feel I belong here. But on the other hand I'm only a British citizen (after taking out naturalisation). I'm not English, I'm aware of that too. My roots are really in Hungary. The cultural side of it. I love everything that's Hungarian -- the arts and the crafts and the literature and the music. So you know that is how I would say it: 'I don't feel that I'm a stranger'.[56]

Conclusion

The British government recruited EVW women as immigrant workers, enlisting them in the national effort to boost the export drive. However, EVW women identified family and community as main resources for survival, not only working to organise national communities in Britain but also identifying with the imagined community of nation. Their strong desire to return indicates their sense of themselves as exiles rather than immigrants.

Although this identification usually involved a traditional gender role, centred on the home and subordinate to men's authority within community organisations, this was generally given much higher value by narrators than the identity of worker -- an identity first encountered by many in the context of deportation to German labour camps. At the same time, the similarity in the value they assign to community may reflect its influence in encouraging conformity to common ideas and values. The possibility of a wider range of negotiations of identity in Britain is suggested by the narrative of the Latvian woman and might emerge in a more detailed oral history project, specific to EVWs.

Traditional gender roles are generally characterised as positive, not oppressive -- a major resource not only for survival, but also for providing a sense of order, stability and belonging. The emphasis on family and community in Britain -- albeit at times disrupted by reflections on violent marriages or divisions within communities -- allows for a more positive construction of lives in which loss is such a major theme and stresses women's active role in reconstructing their lives after the war. Thus, although positioned within British discourses of nation as primarily workers, EVW women's own sense of national identity emphasised family life and community as resources which could be reclaimed against their loss through deportation, against dispossession and displacement as well as in resistance to racism encountered in Britain. As one Ukrainian woman records: 'We come in England, there was nothing, but we organised everything because we have to be in something'.[57]

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[1]Quoted in Steve Cohen (1985) Anti-semitism, immigration controls and the welfare state, *Critical Social Policy*, 13, pp. 73-92, p. 74.

[2]An early text on the EVW scheme was by one of its administrators. See J. A. Tannahill (1958) *European Volunteer Workers in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press). Recent literature includes Diana Kay & Robert Miles (1992) *Refugees or Migrant Workers? European Volunteer Workers in Britain 1946-1951* (London: Routledge); Kathleen Paul (1992) The politics of citizenship in post-war Britain, *Contemporary Record*, 6/3, pp. 452-73; Clive Harris (1993) Post-war migration and the industrial reserve army in Winston James & Clive Harris (Eds) *Inside Babylon : the Caribbean diaspora in Britain* (London : Verso); Kathleen Paul (1995) 'British Subjects' and 'British Stock' : Labour's post-war imperialism, *Journal of British Studies*, 34, pp. 233-76; Kathleen Paul (1997) *Whitewashing Britain: race and citizenship in the postwar era* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press).

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[3]Linda Colley (1992) Britishness and otherness : an argument, *Journal of British Studies*, 31, pp. 309-29.

[4]Jan Pieterse (1992) *White on Black: images of Africa and blacks in Western popular culture*, p. 214 (New Haven : Yale University Press); Anne McClintock (1995) *Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* (London: Routledge); John Gabriel (1998) *Whitewash: racialised politics and the media* (London: Routledge); Richard Dyer (1998) *White* (London: Routledge).

[5]See Laura Tabili (1994) *We Ask for British Justice: black workers and the construction of racial difference in late imperial Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

[6]*The Times*, 10 February 1947.

[7]Royal Commission on Population (1949) *Report*, Paras. 328, 342 (London : HMSO, Cmd. 7695).

[8]Quoted in Kay & Miles, *Refugees or Migrant Workers?* p. 54.

[9]Colin Holmes (1991) Historians and immigration, in Colin Pooley & Ian Whyte (Eds) *Migrants, Emigrants and Immigrants: a social history* p. 193 (London: Routledge); Tony Kushner (1994) *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: a social and cultural history*, p. 235 (Oxford: Blackwell); Tony Kushner (1994) Immigration and 'race relations' in postwar British society, in Paul Johnson (Ed), *Twentieth Century Britain : economic, social and cultural change*, pp. 420-1 (Harlow: Longman).

[10] Tony Kushner (1998), Remembering to forget: racism and anti-racism in postwar Britain, in Bryan Cheyette & Laura Marcus (Eds) *Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew'* , p. 233 (Cambridge : Polity);

[11]John Singleton, *Lancashire on the Scrapheap: the cotton industry 1945-1970*, p. 64 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[12]Kirklees Sound Archive, 062PL

[13]The phrase 'blacks next door' is used for a chapter title in Elspeth Huxley (1964) *Back Street New Worlds: a look at immigrants in Britain* (London : Chatto & Windus).

[14]For the history of concerns about declining birth rates and the connections between imperialism and women's national role as mothers, see Anna Davin (1978) Imperialism and motherhood, *History Workshop*, 5, pp. 9-66.

[15]Quoted in Elizabeth Wilson (1977) *Women and the Welfare State*, p. 152 (London: Tavistock).

[16]Quoted in Barbara Brookes (1988) *Abortion in England 1900-1967*, p. 134 (London : Croom Helm).

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[17]Quoted in Gabriel, *Whitewash*, p. 58.

[18]Royal Commission on Population, Para. 329.

[19]Bill Schwarz (1996) Black metropolis, white England, in Mica Nava & Alan O'Shea (Eds) *Modern Times: reflections on a century of English modernity* p. 197 (London : Routledge).

[20]*Hansard*, 29 February 1947, Col. 758.

[21]*The Times*, 13 January 1948.

[22]*Yorkshire Post*, 30 January 1948.

[23]Quoted in Paul, The Politics of Citizenship, p. 460.

[24]I have drawn here on 11 narratives from the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit (BHRU) by women who came to Britain as EVWs, 2 narratives in the Kirklees Sound Archive (KSA) by women who came as part of the Polish Resettlement Scheme after deportation to Siberia, and on my own interview with Genowefa Dziewanda, who came as an EVW. The interviews from the BHRU are : B0122 (Latvian), B0180 (Hungarian), B0100 (Polish) B0006, B0009, B0014, B0020, B0027, B0036, B0043, B0046, (Ukrainian). The interviews from the KSA are 033PL, 330PL. There are also interviews with women who came to Britain following their mothers' recruitment as EVWs -- BHRU, B0004 (Yugoslavian), B0060 (Latvian).

[25]KSA, 033PL.

[26]For discussion of narratives of deportation by Latvians following the Soviet occupations of 1940 and 1944 see Vieda Skultans (1997) The Expropriated Harvest: narratives of deportation and collectivization in North East Latvia, *History Workshop*, 44, pp. 171-188; Vieda Skultans (1998) Remembering Time and Place: a case study in Latvian narrative, *Oral History*, 26, pp. 55-63; Vieda Skultans (1998) *The Testimony of Lives: narrative and memory in post-Soviet Latvia* (London: Routledge).

[27]Genowefa Dziewanda, Oral testimony, 1996.

[28]BHRU, B0014.

[29]BHRU, B0100.

[30]KSA, 330 PL.

[31]BHRU, B0046.

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[32]KSA 330PL. Later in her narrative the woman identifies this date as the 10th February when, during the night of 10th/11th February there was the first wave of deportations from Poland to Siberia. See Z. S. Siemaszko (1991) The mass deportations of the Polish population to the USSR, 1940-1941 in Keith Sword (Ed.) *The Soviet Takeover of the Polish Eastern Provinces, 1939-41* (London: Macmillan).

[33]KSA, 330PL.

[34]KSA, 330PL

[35]KSA, 330PL.

[36]Genowefa Dziewanda, Oral testimony; BHRU, B0100.

[37]BHRU, B0006; Genowefa Dziewanda, Oral testimony; BHRU B0100.

[38]BHRU, B0006.

[39]BHRU, B0006.

[40]Genowefa Dziewanda, Oral testimony, 1996.

[41]BHRU, B0100.

[42]BHRU, B0100.

[43]BHRU, B0180.

[44]Genowefa Dziewanda, Oral testimony, 1996.

[45]BHRU, B0006.

[46]BHRU, B0043.

[47]BHRU, B0009.

[48]The following narrators were members of Ukrainian women's organisations in Britain : B0006; B0009; B0014; B0027; B0036; B0046.

[49]All the narrators who came to Britain as EVWs worked in textiles on arrival in Britain.

[50]BHRU, B0122.

[51]BHRU, B0122

[52]BHRU, B0122

[53]BHRU, B0122

[54]BHRU, B0122

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[55]KSA, 330PL

[56]BHRU, B0180.

[57]BHRU, B0006.