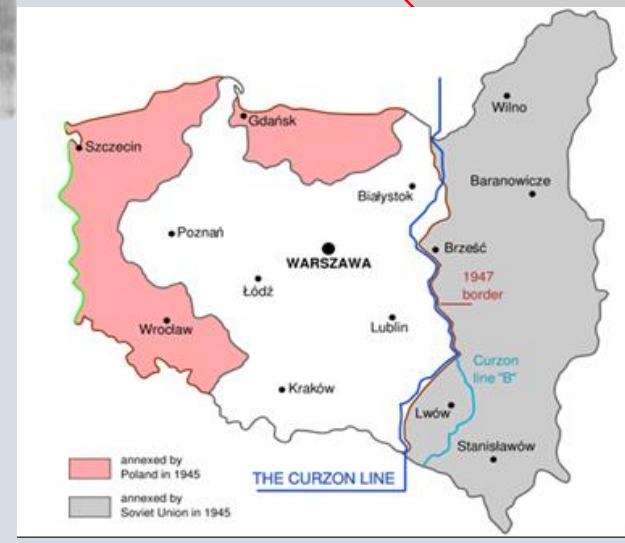




Building the Polish Diaspora in the UK: The Polish Resettlement Act (1947) and the Experience of the Refugee Law and Policy

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Poland and WW2

- Polish immigration to Britain was just one repercussion of the war. The tragic end for Poland was officially confirmed during the Yalta Conference in February 1945. The Polish Government-in-Exile was bitterly disillusioned by the agreement among the Allies that ended the War. Half of Poland's pre-war territory was incorporated into the Soviet Union. This was followed by the recognition of the pro-Soviet Committee of Liberation in Poland. Poles felt utterly betrayed and abandoned by their allies. After Yalta, it became clear that the Polish forces and refugees abroad would not be able to return to their homeland.
- Staying in Britain or its dependent territories seemed to Poles, whether in Britain already or under British command elsewhere, to be the only viable option for their future. It was, however, perceived initially as only a temporary arrangement.
- The British Government found itself faced with responsibility for the Polish political refugees. As it transpired, this challenge was a new experience for the British authorities.

Poles on the British Isles

- From that moment, the British side began an investigation into the possibility of finding a new place for Poles within the British Empire. Importantly, all the plans that were considered reckoned with the proper need for potential residents to be permitted, even enabled, to maintain intact their Polish language, traditions and culture.
- The autumn months of 1946 had seen the accumulation of compelling evidence that ever more Poles, whether from Communist-controlled Poland, or from the Middle East and Africa, were arriving in Britain. The movement of Polish forces had commenced a few days after Bevin's announcement of the organization of the Polish Resettlement Corps, (arranged as a holding unit for members of the Polish Armed Forces) in May 1946. Over the years, wives and dependants were brought to Britain to join them, bringing the estimated total to over 249,000.
- Along with the troops, the entire machinery of well-organized and functioning civilian life among the soldiers and their dependants with hospitals, schools, a press, canteens, theatres and welfare services, was brought to Britain. In fact, a new life for the newly created Polish community had already been born, behind the "political curtain".

Polish Resettlement Camps

- By October 1946, some 120,000 Polish troops were quartered in 265 camps throughout Great Britain, mainly in former British, American or Canadian military camps. 160 camps were used specifically for the Second Corps and its dependants scattered all over the country. From 1947, the camps were administered by the Assistance Board.
- For many years these camps were seen as remote places packed with Nissen huts or poor quality dwellings occupied by more than one family per hut. The Nissen huts were equipped with electric lights, heated by slow combustion stoves, but had poor natural ventilation and light. They were scattered through a wooded area and, apart from a few main paths, were not connected in any way by concrete pavements or covered walkways.
- However, for the first generation of Poles they became a symbol of stability, for the second, much younger generation, the camps would always remain in their memory as happy places, full of freedom.



The Polish Resettlement Bill – 1947

- On 27 March 1947, after several months of preparation and laborious effort by the British Parliament, the Polish Resettlement Bill was passed, providing entitlement to employment and to unemployment benefit in Britain. The Act laid out the responsibilities of several government departments for the employment, health and education of the Poles. It also involved the Ministries of Labour, National Service and Education in caring for the Poles.
- The exceptional aspects of this legislation in terms of modern British refugee policy lay in its clauses relating to the Polish refugees' entitlement to government support in key areas of social life. Major government departments were assigned special duties linked to the management, organization and support of this group of immigrants. Each of them took different responsibilities.

The Committee for the Education of Poles

- On 1 April 1947, the Ministry of Education and the Secretary of the State for Scotland decided to use the powers given them under the Act to delegate their responsibilities for Polish education in Great Britain and accordingly they set up the Committee for the Education of Poles.
- The Committee's principal aim was stressed in its memorandum: 'To fit them (Poles) for absorption into British schools and British careers whilst still maintaining provision for their natural desire for the maintenance of Polish culture and the knowledge of Polish History and Literature.' Bringing the Committee to life was another milestone on the path leading to the stabilization of the lives of Polish refugees after the war. It was also a significant and decisive step in creating and implementing a migration policy for the Polish community already living in Great Britain.

Conclusion

For the British, the passing of the Polish Resettlement Act and the creation of the different agencies related to it was undoubtedly their first modern experience arising out of mass migration and an unprecedented challenge. There is no doubt that passing the two subsequent bills created pillars of the migration policy shaped for the Polish political refugees. The Act enabled Poles to integrate in Britain. In the end, the Polish refugees became one of the most prosperous immigrant groups in the UK. They and their descendants continue to make up a large part of Britain's Polish community as it exists today.

