‘The land of the ever-open door’: To what extent can the experience of childhood evacuation to south Wales during the Second World War be viewed as a beneficial experience for those involved?

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‘The land of the ever-open door’: To what extent can the experience of childhood evacuation to south Wales during the Second World War be viewed as a beneficial experience for those involved?

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2022
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‘The land of the ever-open door’: To what extent can the experience of childhood evacuation to south Wales during the Second World War be viewed as a beneficial experience for those involved?1

Introduction
The totality of the Second World War saw the Welsh people placed directly ‘in the front line’, taking ‘an active role in the war effort’ as the Home Front became one of the main arenas in which the conflict was fought.2 For some Welsh householders, this active role involved opening their homes to the thousands of English children that were evacuated to Wales throughout the war. This dissertation seeks to uncover the experiences of these children, and of the Welsh people who hosted them, in order to determine how beneficial these experiences were for both parties. South Wales received large numbers of evacuees and thus provides a natural focus for this study, with Glamorgan receiving 33,000 and Carmarthenshire receiving 10,000 of the 110,000 children sent to Wales through the evacuation scheme.3 This government scheme was set in motion on 1 September 1939 on the eve of war and continued throughout the conflict in various phases, with the movement of children from at-risk evacuation areas to safer reception areas peaking in 1939, 1940, and 1944 as the risk of bombing increased.4 This process also saw the evacuation of Welsh children within Wales from urban to rural areas, as well as other vulnerable groups, however this study will focus on the evacuation experiences of English children in south Wales as it aims to assess how far national and cultural differences impacted on evacuee-host relationships.5

Despite this active involvement in the war effort, the historiography of the Welsh experience of the Second World War is limited, as highlighted by Martin Johnes’ suggestion

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3 Martin Johnes, Wales since 1939 (Manchester, 2012), p. 15.
that a ‘definitive history’ of Wales and the war is yet to be produced. The topic has often been neglected in studies of Welsh history, with Philip Jenkins referring to the conflict only a handful of times in his study of modern Wales. Other historians have awarded more attention to the impact of the war in Wales, most notably Mari A. Williams, Martin Johnes, Stuart Broomfield, and Phil Carradice, providing valuable contributions to this area of study. However, within these historians’ detailed discussions of the Welsh experience of the war, evacuation generally receives only brief analysis and is examined alongside other aspects of the wartime experience, including rationing, air raids, employment, and politics. Furthermore, although focused studies of evacuation have been produced, these tend towards a British perspective where the Welsh experience is marginalised, shown in John Welshman’s study of evacuees which draws on only one case-study of evacuation to Wales compared to eleven case-studies in England. This dissertation aims to fill this gap in the historiography of the Second World War, and evacuation more specifically, by offering an in-depth examination of childhood wartime evacuation to south Wales, providing insights into the Welsh experience of this aspect of the conflict.

A small number of in-depth examinations of evacuation to specific localities in south Wales have been published, namely those of Hayley Walstow and Carolyn Spiller, which take a focused look at evacuation to Aberdare and to Gwent. These valuable localised studies address what the experience of evacuation was like for the evacuees and their hosts, which this dissertation also aims to do, however both articles are short and outdated, being published over two decades ago, which lessens their utility for historians. Walstow’s and Spiller’s analyses draw on an array of personal testimonies from those who were evacuated to south Wales, which will be combined in this dissertation with the testimonies provided in Carradice’s study of wartime Wales and those which have been more recently published on

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8 Williams, ‘In the Wars: Wales 1914-1945’; Johnes, Wales since 1939; Johnes, ‘Welshness, Welsh soldiers and the Second World War’; Stuart Broomfield, Wales at War: The Experience of the Second World War in Wales (Stroud, 2009); Phil Carradice, Wales at War (Llandysul, 2003).
9 Welshman, Churchill’s Children, p. 11.
various online databases, in order to evaluate the positive and negative aspects of evacuation.\textsuperscript{11} It is important to be aware of the impact of the passage of time on memory and the tendency of the author to reminisce in such testimonies, however they nevertheless provide valuable insights into individual experiences of evacuation which are central to this dissertation.\textsuperscript{12} The wider range of recently published primary material examined in this dissertation will allow for a re-evaluation of Walstow’s and Spiller’s conclusions, building on the localised studies of evacuation that have been produced by offering a wider case-study of south Wales. This regional focus will allow general trends in the evacuation experience to be identified, and will bridge the gap between the more focused, localised studies and the broader studies of Welsh history which discuss evacuation only briefly.

Welshman has suggested that evacuation should be examined from the perspectives of ‘both the children and the adults’ that were involved, owing to the ‘multi-layered’ nature of this experience, therefore this dissertation will explore the experiences of these two groups in turn.\textsuperscript{13} Chapter one will examine what the experience of evacuation to, and life in, south Wales was like for the children who were uprooted from their homes in urban areas of England. The positive and negative aspects of this process will be determined using a range of oral and written testimonies from former evacuees, contemporary newspaper articles which discuss the scheme, and photographs of evacuees in south Wales. A discussion of these positive and negative aspects of the evacuee experience will involve assessments of how safe the evacuees truly were from bombing raids, and the mixed feelings of adventure and homesickness that many felt. This section will also evaluate how far the evacuated children integrated with local children and the wider community, by examining their schooling, recreational activities, and their relationships with their foster parents.

Chapter two will shift the dissertation’s focus to exploring the experience of evacuation for householders in south Wales who hosted evacuees throughout the war, and will consider their responses to the arrival of English evacuees in their villages and homes. This chapter

\textsuperscript{11} Carradice, Wales at War.
\textsuperscript{12} Welshman, Churchill’s Children, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{13} Welshman, Churchill’s Children, p. 5.
will assess the extent to which various factors influenced these responses, including differences in nationality, culture, and social class between evacuees and hosts, as well as the financial difficulties faced by foster parents and their feelings of pride in contributing to the war effort. There were contemporary fears that the wartime influx of English incomers would threaten the Welsh language, therefore the impact of evacuation on Welsh language use will be explored, adding to the historiography of the Second World War in Wales as this impact has not been extensively discussed in isolation from other wartime factors which affected language use. These explorations will allow for comments on the impact of evacuation on Welsh identity, contributing to the overarching aim of this dissertation of evaluating how beneficial evacuation was for communities in south Wales, as well as the evacuees themselves.

14 Broomfield, *Wales at War*, p. 147.
Chapter One: The Evacuee Experience

For most children, the evacuee experience began with a long train journey to their destination, which often remained a mystery until the journey had commenced. The general mood on the train was one of excitement and adventure as some children had rarely travelled by train or left their home areas before, however this excitement quickly wore off as reality and boredom set in, with many accounts of the journey describing the children’s tears, hunger, discomfort and tiredness. The long journey saw many evacuees arrive in south Wales at night, and made for an exhausting and trying day for the young children who had already suffered separation from their parents, making clear that the initial experience of the evacuation process was a decidedly negative one. This is further shown in Gillian Wallis’ suggestion that in those instances where evacuee groups were warmly welcomed in south Wales, this had little impact on the children who arrived ‘confused, frightened, and bedraggled’. Furthermore, a number of former evacuees recount the experience of being selected by their prospective foster parents upon arrival negatively, likening the process to a market, as the householders of south Wales gathered to choose which children they wished to host based on appearances alone. Many were separated from their siblings due to the preferences of hosts which arguably heightened their unease, and those who were among the last to be selected were left feeling ‘unwanted

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and very insecure’. This process was understandably intimidating, traumatic, and perhaps even dehumanising for the children, which prompts the question of how beneficial the movement of these children away from their families and familiarity truly was.

Feelings of homesickness quickly set in for the evacuees, whose reactions to the initial evacuation process ranged from crying themselves to sleep to running away. Such feelings were arguably heightened by the children’s separation from their parents at what was an already terrifying time of ‘national crisis’, and some groups were evacuated at such a young age that they had no recollection of their hometowns; a clear negative to the evacuation experience. Consequently, enforced separation resulted in psychological problems for many of the evacuees in adulthood, with one study into the psychological impact of evacuation linking the experience to ‘insecure attachment’ and ‘lower levels of present psychological well-being’, strongly suggesting that evacuation cannot be seen as a beneficial experience. These feelings of trauma and homesickness often manifested themselves in bed-wetting, a ‘common problem’ in the initial evacuee experience and a clear negative aspect for evacuees and hosts alike. However, many evacuees quickly settled into life with their new host families as the homesickness of the first few days eased and the benefits of evacuation to south Wales began to make themselves apparent, conveying the ‘adaptability of children’ which arguably ensured the success of the scheme.

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24 Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, p. 29.

At the close of the war, the *Carmarthen Journal* stated that the hosting of evacuees in the homes of the Welsh people was ‘Welsh hospitality at its best’. While the newspaper may have been biased in aiming to show Carmarthen’s residents in a positive light, it cannot be denied that many evacuees in south Wales found in their hosts a loving, caring family. When remembering their experience, evacuees have often recalled being well-looked after by their foster parents, who were kind, generous, and affectionate, and provided ‘security and a stability’ for the displaced children. Ted Cooke has even referred to the couple who first hosted him in Cwmaman as ‘angels’, leaving no doubt as to the affection that existed between evacuees and their hosts, a clear benefit of evacuation to south Wales. There were some experiences that contrasted this happy image however, and in extreme cases evacuees were abused by their hosts and had to work to earn their keep. Cooke has referred to his time with his second host family as a ‘long road of misery’, contrasting his earlier angelic hosts, which highlights the mixed experiences evacuees had as they moved from billet to billet. The notion of a long road of unhappiness suggests that a key downside to being evacuated was the inability to know when the war would end and the children could return home, which arguably exacerbated feelings of homesickness. While these experiences were undeniably traumatic and far from beneficial for these individuals, they appear to have been exceptions to the rule. In some cases, evacuation provided care and respite rather than trauma and upset, as Ruby Evans experienced ‘six long wonderful years’

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30 Cooke, ‘The Evacuee’.
31 Welshman, *Churchill’s Children*, p. 228.
away from the abuse she endured at home. Thus, while some evacuees did experience a ‘chilly’ reaction in south Wales, it is clear that most ‘eventually settled down’ with their foster families and ‘enjoyed’ life in Wales.

However, initial tensions between the evacuees and local children did exist in south Wales, suggesting a lack of integration with the host community. Such tensions presented themselves in different ways, ranging from practical jokes to physical violence as stones were thrown at evacuees and ‘numerous battles’ broke out, creating a hostile environment that was far from beneficial for the displaced children. Furthermore, local and evacuee children were often separated for their schooling as most schools could not accommodate large groups of evacuees, presenting further barriers to integration. A shift system was introduced which saw the school day halved between evacuees and local children, eliciting criticism in the press as this was not viewed as a viable long-term solution. Yet as the war progressed, the remaining children often merged into local classes and schooling returned to normal, shown as George Prager moved from being schooled alongside fellow evacuees in various civic buildings to the local school alongside local children after many evacuees left Rhymney following the Battle of Britain, easing the tensions that arose from the shift system and the resulting lack of integration. Moreover, many of the former evacuees who recalled animosity between themselves and the local children also made clear that no serious violence occurred, suggesting that it was not as serious a situation as it appeared, and

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37 Welshman, Churchill’s Children, pp. 161, 243.
‘friendly relationships’ often followed.\textsuperscript{38} The evacuee groups clearly integrated well with the local children and wider community despite the initial tensions and difficulties presented by their schooling, as former evacuees have often recounted making friends with the Welsh children and playing together.\textsuperscript{39} Local and evacuee children attended parties together, played rugby matches against each other, and in Ystradowen, Ronald Dench was given the honour of carrying his Welsh classmate’s coffin, which acts as a clear testament to the way that evacuees were accepted by local children and formed strong friendships.\textsuperscript{40} These friendships highlight a key benefit of evacuation as they arguably helped the evacuees settle into their new lives and eased feelings of isolation and homesickness.

These feelings predominantly arose amongst evacuees as a result of the difficulties of adjusting to the different ‘way of life’ in south Wales that ‘nearly all child evacuees had to face’.\textsuperscript{41} The movement of thousands of English children into south Wales resulted in a ‘clash of cultures’ between the evacuees and the host communities, with the more rural, traditional living conditions and customs that existed in south Wales at the root of this.\textsuperscript{42} Johnes has suggested that the ‘sense of being in a foreign land’ that resulted from these cultural differences enhanced the trauma that some evacuees felt, which is highlighted as one group of London evacuees refused to disembark in Ferryside as they felt it was ‘too quiet’ and were disconcerted by the calm of the village.\textsuperscript{43} The rural nature of life in south Wales’ villages certainly caused unease for the urban evacuees, with the surprise of having to use an outside toilet being a recurring motif in the testimonies of former evacuees.\textsuperscript{44} Yet these differences generally evoked curiosity amidst the confusion, as activities such as

\textsuperscript{39} Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, p. 25; Barratt, ‘Evacuee Account’; Walker, ‘Evacuee to South Wales’.
\textsuperscript{41} Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, p. 28.
\textsuperscript{43} Johnes, \textit{Wales since 1939}, p. 15.
milking the cows, the sight of livestock in the street, and the lack of mains utilities in many villages created ‘quite an experience for a townie’, and stood out for the evacuees as novelties and key snapshots of their experience.⁴⁵

The prevalence of the Welsh language was perhaps the primary cultural difference between the evacuees and their hosts, as Welsh was still widely spoken in many areas, creating a ‘totally different environment’ for the English evacuees.⁴⁶ The language difference is frequently recalled by former evacuees, as Alan Currie has noted the difficulties of adjusting to ‘people who spoke funny’, and Peter Paterson recalled his struggles in pronouncing the name of his new home Cwmllynfell.⁴⁷ However, Janet Davies has argued that the evacuees ‘were rapidly assimilated’ into their host communities despite language differences, which seem to have constituted a more negative experience for the hosts of south Wales rather than the evacuees, as will be discussed in the following chapter.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the cultural differences that evacuees experienced are often recounted with humour rather than horror, disputing E. R. Chamberlin’s suggestion that ‘neither much liked what it saw’ when town met country through the evacuation scheme.⁴⁹ This humour is made clear by Walstow as she recounts one host having a ‘good bit of fun’ with her evacuee when she tried to recite her prayers in Welsh, suggesting that a lack of understanding did not always lead to hostile relations.⁵⁰ Similarly, Welshman has described the laughter which arose when George Prager realised he had confused Nos Da with ‘North Star’, highlighting the warmth and

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⁵⁰ Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, p. 28.
humour that prevailed in the evacuee experience as moments which could have caused tension between host and evacuee instead caused laughter.  

Perhaps the clearest benefit of evacuation to south Wales was the safety and protection it provided for the children sent there to shelter from the war. Government propaganda posters emphasised the danger of remaining in at-risk English cities, and the contrast between the ‘quiet and peaceful’ nature of life in wartime south Wales and the bombed-out cities that evacuees eventually returned to is striking. For many evacuees, the perceived safety of Wales was a key motivating factor in their evacuation, as Jean Cruichshank was evacuated after a bomb fell near to where she was playing, and George Lock believed that being evacuated to Aberdare ‘saved his life’. However, south Wales was not completely safe from the dangers of war. With France’s capitulation in June 1940, south Wales became within range of ‘enemy aircraft’, and 984 civilians died in air raids in Wales during the war. Perhaps the most tragic of occurrences was the bombing of Cwmparc in the Rhondda Valley on 29 April 1941, which saw four evacuees from London killed. The surviving sibling of the evacuees recalled being buried for ten hours and seeing her sister lying dead in what can only be described as a traumatic experience for the young evacuee, demonstrating that for some families, evacuation could not have been further from beneficial. On the surface this tragedy presents a negative impression of evacuation to south Wales, and has received considerable attention from historians, yet such attacks were ‘isolated’ incidents and often the result of errors by enemy pilots. The isolated nature of such tragedies is arguably why...
Cwmparc has received such attention, yet the frequent reference to the incident in studies of wartime Wales skews the picture by presenting south Wales as highly unsafe for the evacuees, and evacuation as a failed exercise. While bombers did visit the skies of south Wales throughout the war, there can be no doubt that those children who were evacuated there fared better than if they had remained at home.\(^{58}\) It was almost as if there wasn’t a war on in south Wales, a clear testament to the safety and security of evacuation to this region.\(^{59}\)

In addition to the safety that rural south Wales provided, a sense of freedom and adventure was also enjoyed, signalling another key benefit of the evacuee experience. Having spent their early lives ‘cooped up’, the stark contrast of the mountains and rivers of south Wales provided a vast, ‘magnificent playground’ for the evacuated children, many of whom had never experienced nature before.\(^{60}\) George Prager enjoyed fishing in rock-pools, the views of the Brecon Beacons, and the ‘freedom’ of long bicycle rides in the sunshine, and for some evacuees, it was difficult to adjust back to city life on their return home after relishing the freedom of rural south Wales.\(^{61}\) While this could be interpreted as a downside to their experience, some felt that life in south Wales had changed their outlook and taught them self-sufficiency, making clear the perceived benefits of evacuation to south Wales as the experience taught them valuable life skills.\(^{62}\) This appreciation of the rural setting is further shown as images of south Wales’ coastline and countryside were kept as mementos by a group of evacuees from Kent, signalling an enjoyment of the region’s peace and beauty.\(^{63}\)

These images of evacuee life in Pembrokeshire also showed children feeding chickens and cows on local farms, smiling while they do so.\(^{64}\) It is possible that these smiles were poses

\(^{58}\) Broomfield, *Wales at War*, p. 32.


\(^{61}\) Welshman, *Churchill’s Children*, pp. 162, 239; Valerie Newsum, ‘My Evacuation: Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen’, written testimony, 23 November 2003, BBC People’s War Online Archive. Available at [https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/02/a2071702.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/02/a2071702.shtml), Accessed 22 March 2022;

\(^{62}\) Newsum, ‘My Evacuation: Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen’.

\(^{63}\) Wheeler, ‘Second World War Album’, pp. 9, 17 (See Appendix B Figures 5 and 6).

\(^{64}\) Wheeler, ‘Second World War Album’, p. 1 (See Appendix B Figure 7).
for the camera, yet the positive accounts of getting involved with farm work by other evacuees corroborate the image of enjoyment of rural farming life, as Joan Duncan remembered the ‘good fun’ of ‘swimming in the harvested corn’ and sliding down haystacks, combatting Welshman’s suggestion that boredom quickly set in for the evacuees.\(^65\) While Duncan also recalls the ‘hard work’ that was required, a downside to her experience, the fun that was had in south Wales’ rural surroundings is vividly remembered, and it is clear that many evacuees, some of whom had never even seen cows before, thoroughly enjoyed the benefits of being billeted on south Wales’ farms.\(^66\)

Despite this plentiful environment, some evacuees did experience substandard conditions in their billets in south Wales. In Aberdare, one girl was billeted in a ‘filthy’ house where she contracted lice, and in many houses there was overcrowding, damp, and cracked walls.\(^67\) Such conditions were seen to be ‘inadequate’ when compared to conditions at home, with Ann Broad remembering her dissatisfaction at having to share a bed with two others at her billet after previously having her own.\(^68\) For the most part, however, facilities in south Wales were of a high quality. Photographs show evacuees using the impressive education facilities on offer, facilities that were often not available to the children at home.\(^69\) In Penygroes, art classes were taken in the open air, an unlikely experience in the crowded home cities of evacuees, and in Clydach, Patrick Devine attended a ‘much more modern’ school with a ‘very good’ gymnasium and nearby sports field that his school in Chatham did not have.\(^70\) These modern facilities thus brought clear benefits to the education of evacuated children in south Wales by providing new educational experiences and opportunities.

\(^65\) Duncan, ‘Evacuation to South Wales’; Welshman, *Churchill’s Children*, p. 176.
\(^66\) Duncan, ‘Evacuation to South Wales’; Angus Calder, quoted in Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, p. 30; Welshman, *Churchill’s Children*, pp. 135, 137.
\(^67\) Spiller, ‘Evacuees in Gwent’, p. 33.
\(^68\) Spiller, ‘Evacuees in Gwent’, p. 33; Broad, ‘My War and Evacuation Memories’.
\(^69\) Anon., ‘London Evacuees in Carmarthenshire, Wales’, photograph (1940), Catalogue no.: IWM D 1057, Imperial War Museum Online Archive. Available at [https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205197790](https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205197790), Accessed 17 February 2022 (See Appendix B Figure 3); Devine, ‘Patrick’s Evacuation Story’.
\(^70\) Anon., ‘London Evacuees in Penygroes, Carmarthenshire, Wales’, photograph (1940), Catalogue no.: IWM D 1046, Imperial War Museum Online Archive. Available at [https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205197786](https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205197786), Accessed 17 February 2022 (See Appendix B Figure 4); Devine, ‘Patrick’s Evacuation Story’.
The clear success of the evacuation scheme in south Wales further highlights the benefits of evacuation to this region. Following the initial evacuation, a ‘steady trickle home’ from the reception areas began as the ‘enemy action’ which had been feared in England’s urban centres did not immediately materialise.\footnote{Broomfield, \textit{Wales at War}, p. 29.} In Wales however, a contemporary study into the success of evacuation revealed that in one Welsh county, 81\% of evacuees remained in their billets in January 1940, which implies that evacuation to Wales was perceived as more beneficial and enjoyable than elsewhere, as the scheme enjoyed a lasting success in this region.\footnote{Mass Observation Archive, Topic Collection Evacuation 1939-1944, 5/1/L, pp. 774-775. Available at https://www.massobservation-amdigital-co-uk.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/Documents/Images/TopicCollection-5/772, Accessed 2 March 2022.} Furthermore, a number of evacuees chose to permanently remain in south Wales after the war instead of returning home to England, including Barbara Bevan, who remained with her foster parents in Aberdare and viewed her evacuation to south Wales as ‘the best thing that ever happened’ to her.\footnote{Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, p. 29.} Such occurrences were not isolated, as the testimonies of those who lived in south Wales during the war reveal further instances of evacuees choosing to stay beyond the conflict.\footnote{Sawtell, ‘Memories of Wartime Evacuees’; Anon., ‘Our Evacuees’.} Although Broomfield has suggested that those who stayed on did so out of necessity, which is supported by Bevan having lived in an orphanage prior to her evacuation, the decidedly positive and life-changing experiences of those who remained in south Wales make clear the enduring benefits that the process brought to a number of lives.\footnote{Broomfield, \textit{Wales at War}, p. 34; Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, p. 29.}

Furthermore, a considerable number of those who did return home have revisited south Wales in adulthood, often with their families to show them where they were billeted.\footnote{Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, pp. 28-29; Newsum, ‘My Evacuation: Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen’; Dench, ‘Evacuee’s WW2 memories’, p. 2; Pring, ‘Wales: Where I Sheltered from the War’.} During these return visits, there were happy reunions with their former host families, and many evacuees kept in contact with their wartime companions, with Louisa Small stating that she and the daughter of her hosts remained ‘like sisters’, conveying the enduring
impact of evacuation on the lives of those involved.\textsuperscript{77} Moreover, the fact that so many former evacuees have been willing to recount their wartime experiences in written and oral testimonies strongly suggests that these were times of fun and freedom rather than misery and trauma. While such remembrances may be more likely to focus on ‘the happy times’, many positive accounts of evacuation to south Wales do also note the downsides of the experience, suggesting that they can be viewed as unbiased testimonies of the experience of wartime childhood evacuation.\textsuperscript{78} Such recollections frequently employ phrases that encapsulate the joy of this experience, with Ivor Bail referring to his time as an evacuee in Tintern as ‘some of the happiest days of my life’, and Valerie Newsum stating that she ‘loved every minute’ of her time in Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen, leaving no doubt that this was a predominantly happy and beneficial time in the lives of those children evacuated to south Wales during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{79}


\textsuperscript{78} Talbot, ‘A Faint Recollection’, p. 30; Cooke, ‘The Evacuee’; Tait, ‘Childhood Memories’.

\textsuperscript{79} Bail, ‘From Folkestone to Tintern’; Newsum, ‘My Evacuation: Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen’.
Chapter Two: The Response within south Wales

Whilst the experiences of the evacuees themselves are integral to this dissertation, the attitudes and experiences of householders acting as evacuee hosts in south Wales are also important to consider. The presiding sentiment within Wales at the outbreak of war was one of ‘full support’, with The Manchester Guardian reporting in 1940 that a ‘resolute spirit’ had been shown in Wales in opposing ‘Hitlerism’.\(^80\) There were those that did not share such enthusiastic sentiments, as some Welsh nationalists viewed the conflict ‘as an English war’, and the evacuation of English children into Wales as ‘one of the most horrible threats’ ever posed to Welsh life, which demonstrates that some vehemently believed that evacuation would not be a beneficial experience for the Welsh people.\(^81\) However, these opinions were not widely supported, and Johnes has identified ‘an immediate willingness’ from many Welsh people to ‘do their bit’, with the hosting of evacuees providing an opportunity for civilians to contribute to the war effort, which undoubtedly evoked feelings of ‘duty’ and ‘patriotism’ amongst householders.\(^82\) While the existence of government propaganda posters which aimed to encourage people to house evacuees implies that there was little enthusiasm for the scheme, the depiction of a foster parent alongside soldiers in one poster entitled *She’s in the Ranks too!* emphasises a sense of duty and represents a source of pride for those who did host evacuees.\(^83\) The hosts received many commendations, being presented in the national press as ‘respectable’ and ‘reputable’, and Broomfield has suggested that the housing of evacuees in Wales demonstrates its ‘strategic’ importance to the war effort, which arguably engendered a sense of superiority and further pride amongst the hosts.\(^84\) These feelings, and the perceived importance of Wales, signal clear benefits of evacuation as Wales and its people came to play a valuable role in the war effort, contrary to the nationalist opinions discussed above.

\(^{83}\) Anon., *She’s in the Ranks too!*, propaganda poster (n.d.), Catalogue no.: IWM Art.IWM PST 8561, Imperial War Museum Online Archive. Available at [https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/19994](https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/19994), Accessed 17 February 2022 (See Appendix A Figure 2).
Despite this pride, there was considerable hostility from some householders in south Wales towards hosting evacuees in their homes. This hostility was demonstrated in the way that many householders ‘had to be forced’ to take evacuees in, resulting in experiences like that of John Talbot in Ebbw Vale, who was ‘thrust unceremoniously in through the front door’ of his ‘astounded’ hosts after they stated that they didn’t want an evacuee.\(^{85}\) Such incidents undeniably created a negative experience for the evacuees, who were often left feeling unwanted, and the ‘aggrieved’ householders, whose daily lives were now disrupted by the responsibility of caring for a stranger.\(^{86}\) This disruption to the lives of hosts was recognised at the time of the evacuation, as a report into the scheme’s success by the University of Liverpool in 1940 recorded the ‘sacrifice’ that hosting evacuees demanded from householders, noting the ‘longer working day’ and limitations to social lives that caring for evacuees brought, which were exacerbated in households without children of their own.\(^{87}\) Similarly, some housewives in south Wales felt that they ‘had enough to do’ without the extra responsibility of caring for evacuees, which led to further opposition to participating in the scheme and makes clear the perceived lack of benefits that evacuation presented for hosts.\(^{88}\) Thus the initial reaction to the evacuees in Wales ‘was distinctly chilly’, and they appear to have become less welcome as the war progressed, with compulsory billeting being introduced as enthusiasm for the scheme ‘had grown a bit stale’, highlighting the mixed nature of the evacuation experience which undeniably created an insecure environment.\(^{89}\)

The ‘poor social standards’ of the evacuees was a key factor in these hostile responses, eliciting horror from some householders, as one woman in Chepstow encountered an evacuee who did their business in ‘a corner of the dining room’.\(^{90}\) Although Spiller has argued that such incidents were ‘extreme examples’, they highlight the challenges

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householders had to face, and the differences in ‘codes of behaviour’ between the urban evacuees and their Welsh hosts, which laid the ground for tensions. Johnes has also emphasised that alongside the worries evoked by the urban evacuees’ ‘moral condition’, their ‘physical state’ also caused concern. Many of the new arrivals were found to be ‘verminous, diseased and inadequately clothed’, which understandably resulted in fears that they would spread their diseases to the local children. Yet these fears do not appear to have materialised, as the evacuation had little impact on scarlet fever rates in Wales despite the influx of children from urban centres where disease was ‘endemic’, suggesting that the issues which arose following evacuation were not as impactful as contemporaries feared. Where such issues did cause inconveniences for the hosts, solutions were found, as compensation was eventually given to those hosts whose charges suffered from bed-wetting, a common affliction for the young evacuees, showing that while there were clear negatives to the host experience, these problems did receive the necessary attention to ensure the scheme’s success. Furthermore, some areas of south Wales were left unaffected by such problems, as they either did not receive evacuees from London’s slums or primarily received older children, meaning that the issues of disease and poor behaviour were not as keenly felt in south Wales as in other reception areas, therefore evacuation can be seen as more beneficial for hosts in south Wales than elsewhere in Britain.

Such negative attitudes towards evacuees were undeniably rooted in the insular nature of some south-Welsh communities. There were ‘few incomers’ to Wales during the 1920s and 1930s, which arguably made the problems presented by the arrival of evacuees more pronounced for these communities and increased hostility towards the vast wartime influx. Trevor Sawtell, who lived in Ebbw Vale during the war, has noted the ‘ignorance’ and isolated nature of south Wales’ rural communities ‘where anything outside the norm is

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91 Spiller, ‘Evacuees in Gwent’, pp. 32-33; Broomfield, Wales at War, p. 30.
92 Johnes, Wales since 1939, p. 16.
95 Broomfield, Wales at War, p. 34.
97 Evans, ‘Immigrants and Minorities in Wales’, p. 15.
sensational’, which did provoke an unfavourable response to some evacuees who were thus viewed as outsiders.98 This isolation and traditional outlook arguably intensified the perceived threat posed by the evacuees to Welsh culture and identity, a key cause of opposition to the evacuees within south Wales.99 Just as the ‘culture gap’ between evacuees and their hosts was a source of unease for the evacuees, the host communities also found this to be an issue, and tensions were expected to emerge based on the different ways of life of the urban evacuees and their predominantly rural hosts.100 For the most part, both groups did quickly and easily adjust to each other across Britain, shown in the happy image printed in the Daily Express the day after evacuation began which portrays foster parents and their new evacuees already settled into family life together.101 However, the propaganda element of such images in encouraging participation in the scheme cannot be denied, and in south Wales in particular, the incongruities between rural and urban life, and Welsh and English life, could not be as easily passed over, as the increased contact between England and Wales through evacuation highlighted ‘their differences’.102

The threat posed to the Welsh language by such contact can be viewed as a clear downside to the evacuation experience for householders in south Wales, as ‘Englishness seeped into Wales’ with the arrival of evacuees and provoked criticism from Welsh nationalists.103 Although the Welsh language was in decline by the advent of the Second World War, the 1931 census recorded 97,932 Welsh monoglots in Wales.104 This continued use of the Welsh language was threatened by the influx of English-speaking evacuees as ‘increasing inter-cultural contact’ necessitated ‘group adaptation’.105 The local community in Preseli had to

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98 Sawtell, ‘Memories of Wartime Evacuees’.
100 Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, p. 29; Welshman, Churchill’s Children, p. 223.
101 Anon., ‘These are temporary parents’, Daily Express, 2 September 1939, p. 16. Available at https://www.ukpressonline.co.uk.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/ukpressonline/database/search/preview.jsp?fileName=DExp_1939_09_02_016&sr=1, Accessed 17 March 2022 (See Appendix B Figure 8); Dale, ‘The Pied Piper Has Played His Tune’, p. 418.
104 Morgan, Rebirth of a Nation, pp. 243-244, 258; Johnes, ‘Welshness, Welsh soldiers and the Second World War’, p. 79.
learn English in order to accommodate their wartime incomers, and bilingual teaching was ‘abandoned’ in the Rhondda after the evacuees’ arrival, signifying a clear negative impact of evacuation for traditional Welsh communities. These adjustments that evacuation necessitated were not only an inconvenience for the hosts as they now had to learn a new language, they also demonstrate how the scheme triggered a decline in the use of Welsh. Few Welsh speakers remain in Preseli today, and the 1951 census recorded a general decline of 58% from 1931 in the number of Welsh monoglots, suggesting that wartime evacuation negatively impacted Welsh-language use and thus cannot be seen to have benefitted south-Welsh communities. Furthermore, this decline can be linked to fears that the influx of evacuees would threaten the survival of ‘a distinct Welsh social and cultural identity’, with the Second World War seemingly representing a ‘death blow to Welshness’ as ‘even the most remote Welsh villages’ were exposed to English incomers and influences, signalling a further drawback to the evacuation experience for the Welsh people as their identity was diminished. The impact of evacuation on language use and identity did vary across south Wales, owing to the differing concentrations of Welsh speakers in different counties, yet campaigns were begun by Welsh nationalists to ‘protect’ the language and culture in response to the ‘influx’ of English-speaking evacuees, demonstrating that the level of fear and opposition that evacuation evoked was considerable.

However, it appears that these fears were largely unfounded as many evacuees in south Wales learned Welsh themselves, therefore the threat they posed to the language’s survival was not so severe. In September 1940, The Times enthusiastically reported that fears for the Welsh language following the arrival of evacuees had been ‘grievously confounded’, as evacuees in south Wales were able to recite from memory passages of the Bible in Welsh and participated in traditions like the Eisteddfod. Evacuees from Kent to Cilgerran also

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107 Thomas, ‘Nan Thomas’ experience during the Second World War’; Williams, ‘Language Contact and Language Change in Wales’, p. 221.
109 Morgan, Rebirth of a Nation, p. 244; Williams, ‘In the Wars: Wales 1914-1945’, p. 18.
‘acquired an enviable knowledge’ of the language, with their pronunciation in singing Welsh hymns as clear ‘as if they were born Welsh’. Contemporaries did acknowledge the advantages of this, as the ‘likely outcome’ of evacuation was the ‘spread’ of Welsh culture to England once evacuees returned home, implying that the scheme did not threaten Welsh culture and language, but revitalised it, thus benefitting Welsh communities who wished to preserve their cultural identity and traditions. Former evacuees have also recalled learning Welsh phrases and greetings from the locals, conveying a willingness on behalf of the evacuees to adapt to their new cultural environment, which arguably allowed for a more beneficial experience for the hosts by removing the potential for tensions and the need for extreme adjustments to their home life, as the use of the language continued in Welsh homes despite the evacuees’ presence. Furthermore, the Welsh Courts Act of 1942 allowed Welsh to be used in law courts, implying that the evacuees cannot have posed a considerable threat to the language as its position was in fact strengthened and legitimised during the war. The Welsh language remains ‘at the heart’ of Wales, and while the increased need for bilingualism in response to the evacuees caused some hostility, the enthusiastic response of many evacuees to the language and culture can be seen as a source of pride and enthusiasm for host communities, and was thus a benefit of the evacuation experience.

In addition to the cultural and national differences between host and evacuee, differences in class also created problems, leading to a less than beneficial experience for hosts at both ends of the social scale. Ronald Dench has recounted the ‘upstairs-downstairs situation’ that existed at his billet in Llantwit Major, where he was primarily looked after by maids and saw ‘those upstairs on occasions’, which suggests that upper-class hosts in south Wales generally had little to do with their evacuees, who were perhaps viewed as an inconvenience. At

114 Broomfield, Wales at War, p. 147.
the other end of the scale, lower-class hosts seem to have been more inconvenienced by their guests, creating a more negative experience. There were feelings of inferiority in some lower-class households in Wales where the evacuees billeted with them were of a higher ‘economic or social standard’, causing tensions as billets were criticised as ‘dirty’.

There was also a sense amongst the Welsh working-classes that they were bearing ‘the brunt of the sacrifice’ in housing evacuees despite their lack of extra space and resources, which undoubtedly fostered feelings of ‘disgruntlement’ and hostility towards the burdens the scheme placed on such households, although efforts were made in some areas to share the burden equally.

The financial burden that the scheme created for these working-class households was considerable, as evacuees needed to be fed, entertained and clothed. The government did provide an allowance for those who billeted evacuees, however an investigation into the scheme’s success in 1940 found that over 52% of hosts interviewed in Wales viewed the allowance as ‘inadequate’. This perceived inadequacy and the resulting financial strain of hosting evacuees created a situation that was far from beneficial for south-Welsh families who were already struggling as a result of the interwar economic depression and high unemployment, which meant that the financial impact of billeting evacuees was more acute in Wales than elsewhere in Britain. Yet despite these financial struggles and the tensions which arose from class differences, many were ‘happy to accept the financial and social burden’, and much generosity and kindness was shown to evacuees in south Wales. Some houses became crowded with the billeting of evacuees, shown as one house in Llansadwrn hosted three evacuees in addition to the family of five who lived there, yet despite these arrangements the evacuees were made to feel ‘welcome and happy’ by their hosts, a clear ‘tribute’ to the hospitality shown by the householders of south Wales.

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118 Broomfield, Wales at War, p. 30; Evans, ‘Immigrants and Minorities in Wales’, p. 11.
119 Broomfield, Wales at War, p. 32.
120 Spiller, ‘Evacuees in Gwent’, p. 36; Mass Observation Archive, Topic Collection Evacuation, 5/1/L, p. 784.
121 Williams, ‘In the Wars: Wales 1914-1945’, p. 1; Broomfield, Wales at War, p. 17; Morgan, Rebirth of a Nation, p. 270.
122 Johnes, Wales since 1939, p. 15.
123 Barratt, ‘Evacuee Account’.
creates an image of a welcoming community who opened their homes to children in need despite their own struggles and limited resources, strongly suggesting that the people of south Wales were happy to contribute to the war effort despite the burdens this placed upon them, creating a beneficial experience for their evacuees and providing another source of pride for the hosts.

It is true that some areas of south Wales seemed to be overrun with evacuees, which can be viewed as a further contributing factor towards the hostile response shown to some evacuees. Aberdare was described in 1941 as being ‘crammed’ with evacuees, and photographs of evacuee arrivals illustrate the large numbers that were received by south Wales.124 As aerial bombardment continued, the ‘evacuees kept coming’, and reception areas often received more than expected, as 577 evacuees arrived in Cardiff on 14 July 1944 rather than the 400 they had expected, suggesting a lack of organisation within the scheme.125 These arrivals understandably led to hostility and ‘disappointing’ responses from host communities as small villages faced the difficult task of accommodating large numbers of evacuees.126 However, their presence did bring benefits for south Wales’ host communities that arguably made the upheaval worthwhile. Some hosts preferred to house older children who would be able to help with housework, suggesting that evacuees were not always a financial burden but could be a beneficial, practical help.127 In Caerphilly, one milkman was found to have been claiming subsidies for providing milk ‘to evacuees who did not exist’, showing that there were opportunities to profit off the scheme, even if some were not entirely lawful.128 The appreciation of the evacuees’ presence in south Wales was not always as questionable, as many locals seemed to genuinely enjoy having them there. In Preseli, Nan Thomas was sad to see the evacuees leave, noting a sense of ‘emptiness’ after they had gone, and in Cilgerran, the hosts often introduced the children as ‘our evacuee’,

124 Edwin Greening, quoted in Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, p. 27; Anon. ‘Evacuees arriving at a railway station in South Wales’, photograph, 3 June 1940, The Open University. Available at https://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=1749485&section=4, Accessed 24 March 2022 (See Appendix B Figure 9).
125 Broomfield, Wales at War, p. 35.
127 Small, ‘Fun in the Country’.
128 Glyndwr Jones, in Broomfield, Wales at War, p. 83.
implying that they were affectionately viewed as valued members of the community, which undeniably contributed towards a beneficial experience for the ‘grateful’ and ‘decidedly happy’ evacuees, and their ‘proud’ hosts.\textsuperscript{129}

There was also a great deal of love and kindness offered to the evacuees in south Wales. Upon arrival, many evacuee groups were given a warm welcome by the locals, as \textit{The Aberdare Leader} reported in 1940 that the new arrivals were greeted by ‘hundreds of townspeople’ who held a ‘warmth’ in their ‘hearts’ towards the children.\textsuperscript{130} It is possible that in reporting this enthusiastic welcome, the newspaper intended to present Aberdare’s residents favourably, limiting the reliability of such descriptions. Yet the similar response of ‘crowds of cheering residents’ greeting evacuees in Pontypridd suggests that such welcomes were common in south Wales, and demonstrates that there was considerable enthusiasm for the scheme and pride in being able to participate.\textsuperscript{131} This pride often manifested itself in the care and kindness afforded to many evacuees by their hosts, and in Cilgerran, some hosts even seemed to ‘compete’ with each other ‘in the care of their evacuees’, creating benefits for both the children who were well-looked after, and the hosts who perhaps felt a sense of superiority.\textsuperscript{132} After visiting the children evacuated to Cilgerran, the Mayor of Hythe commented that he had not encountered a child ‘who was not happy and well’, a clear commendation of the care and kindness awarded to the children by the locals who had ‘grown to love and do for them as they would do for their own’, signalling a positive response and clear affection towards the evacuees from their hosts.\textsuperscript{133}

The children of hosts also seemed happy to accept their new companions and offered kindness and friendship, treating their evacuees like a sibling.\textsuperscript{134} It is clear that strong bonds

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\textsuperscript{130} \textit{The Aberdare Leader}, quoted in Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{131} Don Powell, in Broomfield, \textit{Wales at War}, p. 31.


\textsuperscript{133} Wheeler, ‘Second World War Album’, pp. 7, 1.

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of love and affection grew from these billeting arrangements as some hosts even wished to adopt their evacuees after the war, showing that the experience of evacuation could be as enjoyable and impactful for the hosts as it was for the evacuees.\textsuperscript{135} Many hosts were sympathetic to the difficulties the children faced in being separated from their parents, and to the needs and customs of their evacuees, despite the contemporary fears discussed above that their presence would threaten Welsh cultural traditions.\textsuperscript{136} In Tonypandy, the hosts of one Jewish boy wrote to his mother to ask if he was allowed to attend the Baptist chapel with them, which he did alongside attending synagogue, indicating the ‘sensitivity’ and understanding of householders in south Wales who wished to make their evacuees comfortable, as well as a blending of the cultural traditions of host and evacuee which undeniably fostered a harmonious relationship.\textsuperscript{137} Such examples of the affection, kindness and sympathy offered to the evacuees in south Wales make clear that the response within this region was neither exclusively hostile nor indifferent, supporting Broomfield’s argument that the majority of evacuees were received by their Welsh hosts ‘with humanity and compassion’, allowing for a beneficial experience for all involved.\textsuperscript{138}

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\textsuperscript{135} Duncan, ‘Evacuation to South Wales’; Juliet, ‘The changing face of Childhood: Evacuated to Wales’.
\textsuperscript{136} Walstow, ‘Evacuation to Aberdare’, pp. 26-27.
\textsuperscript{137} Broomfield, \textit{Wales at War}, pp. 30-31.
\textsuperscript{138} Broomfield, \textit{Wales at War}, p. 30.
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Conclusion

It can therefore be concluded that the experience of childhood evacuation to south Wales during the Second World War was, to a considerable extent, beneficial for both the evacuees and their hosts. The above discussion has highlighted the variety of experiences that existed, and there were a number of downsides to this experience for both of these groups. The hosts of south Wales endured financial difficulties, disruption to their daily lives, and concerns for the survival of their distinctive culture and language, while the children experienced homesickness, hostility from the local communities, and substandard billeting conditions to varying extents. However isolated these experiences were, they do limit the extent to which evacuation can be seen as wholly beneficial for the thousands of people involved in the scheme.

Yet the benefits of the experience in south Wales cannot be denied, and the positives seem to have been more prevalent and enduring than the negatives. For the hosts, there were feelings of pride in contributing to the war effort, and as most of the initial problems they faced eventually eased, many genuinely enjoyed the presence of their temporary additions. Their fears for the Welsh language and culture did not materialise as the evacuees enthusiastically participated in Welsh customs and traditions, and while differences in class and nationality between host and evacuee did cause tensions, for the most part these were eased by the hospitality and sympathy of the host and a willingness to adapt within both groups. For the evacuees, there was a clear sense of adventure and enjoyment in the south-Welsh countryside, a happy integration with the local children and wider community, and loving relationships were formed with their hosts. Most importantly, the evacuation ensured the safety of these children who may not have survived had they remained at home in England’s urban centres.

There is the possibility that enjoyable experiences are more willingly and easily remembered, and contemporaries did wish to emphasise the success of the scheme, implying that representations of evacuation as a beneficial, positive experience are
skewed. However, many evacuees have remembered their time in south Wales as life-changing and happy, and do note the negative aspects alongside the positives, providing seemingly objective accounts of the personal experience of evacuation which signal that few evacuees in this region endured a wholly negative experience. A comparison of these accounts of former evacuees to south Wales, which have been central to this dissertation, with the recollections of those evacuated elsewhere in Britain would allow further conclusions to be drawn on how beneficial evacuation to south Wales was in relation to other regions, highlighting the aspects of the experience that were distinctive to Wales. In arguing that the experience of evacuation was beneficial for both the evacuees and their hosts, this dissertation has confirmed Walstow’s and Spiller’s conclusions that although there were negative experiences and struggles to adjust, evacuation had an ‘enduring’ impact on the lives of those involved, while also examining a wider case-study of south Wales as a whole, which has allowed the ‘common experiences’ of evacuation to this region to be identified.

Word Count: 7,548

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Appendix A: Government Propaganda Posters

Figure 2: Anon., *She’s in the Ranks too!*, propaganda poster (n.d.), Catalogue no.: IWM Art.IWM PST 8561, Imperial War Museum Online Archive. Available at https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/19994, Accessed 17 February 2022.
Appendix B: Photographs of Evacuees


**Figure 7:** Wheeler, K., ‘Second World War Album Recording the Evacuation of a Kent School to Pembrokeshire’, private papers (n.d.), Catalogue no.: IWM Documents.10662, Imperial War Museum Online Archive, p. 1. Available at [https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1030010503](https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1030010503), Accessed 25 March 2022.

**Figure 8:** Anon., ‘These are temporary parents’, *Daily Express*, 2 September 1939, p. 16. Available at [https://www.ukpressonline-co-uk.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/ukpressonline/database/search/preview.jsp?fileName=DExp_1939_09_02_016&sr=1](https://www.ukpressonline-co-uk.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/ukpressonline/database/search/preview.jsp?fileName=DExp_1939_09_02_016&sr=1), Accessed 17 March 2022.
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