

Post-Socialist experience in the UK

The term post-socialist literally means ‘after socialism’. The project Post-Socialist Britain? Memory, Representation and Political Identity amongst German, Polish and Ukrainian Immigrants in the UK explores how the end of socialism in Central and Eastern Europe changed not just those places formerly under communist rule, but also the democratic and capitalist societies in the West of Europe. One way in which that change is felt is through migration. When people move, they bring their memories with them. Interviews give insight into the individual experiences and identities of Polish migrants living in the UK.

Poles have migrated to the UK for a variety of reasons throughout the twentieth century. During the Second World War, the Polish government in exile moved to London after the fall of France in 1940 and was active until 1990. The Polish army, air force, and navy fought side by side with the British army against the Germans. After 1945 dozens of thousands of people found their homes in the UK. However, the number of Poles coming to the UK increased dramatically following Poland’s accession to the EU in 2004. As in eastern Germany, the transition period in Poland was marked by economic difficulties and the Polish accession to the EU opened the chance for those living in Poland to seek better opportunities in other EU countries, including the UK. According to the most recent census data, people born in Poland represent the second largest migrant group in the UK (after India) with an estimated 682,000 Poles in the country.

For more context to understand the themes and references to the history of the twentieth century, please visit the following link to a video:

<https://postsocialistbritain.bham.ac.uk/education/>

Collective Memories

Poland suffered under occupation by two totalitarian regimes (Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union), which are often presented as equal evils. However, the Polish collective memory of World War II and the communist period is complex and divided. There are fervent debates about the alleged involvement of some Poles in Nazi atrocities committed during the time of the German occupation. Researchers dealing with these issues are often subjected to various political pressures. The ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) has faced international criticism for the introduction of a law that appears to restrict historical discussion, and the memory of communism is sometimes weaponised against political opponents.

These resources were produced in collaboration with the project Post-Socialist Britain? Memory, Representation and Political Identity amongst German, Polish and Ukrainian Immigrants in the UK, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

© Sam Frullo, 2023. This work is licensed under a CC-BY-NC license. Please see separate sheet at <https://postsocialistbritain.bham.ac.uk/education/> for copyright information on the images used in this resource.

No comparison

“We have a nice place, we have a nice apartment. And we have. I have a job. And it was a job that immediately was, how to say. A big leap in wages. Me, okay. There is no comparison when it comes to Poland. And England, no? My work was like that, quite, better paid, because as a CNC machine operator, I went there, the hourly rate was immediately much higher. Also, well, there was a jump right away when it comes to the fact that we could do everything. At the beginning, we were still thinking about it, and for many years, that we would live here again, but we would also put it off a bit and someday maybe we would just come back to Poland, we would buy a house, and so on.”

Two thousand and four

“Well, big obligations, big procedures to rent. And at the same time as we were in this one, it was in the room at first. Just in a room, in a house where two more couples lived. And this one, there was a shared kitchen, a common living room, those things, it used to be that way. And during the next week I was given two interviews. Right in my industry. And I got two job offers, both after a few days. I don’t know, maybe I was in a good time for this ... But I think so, because two thousand and four was a good time to start working in England.”

Desire to change

“Well ... my experience with migration ... It was certainly great, well for me, I personally say of course, because everyone’s experience is different, for me it was, well, a greater shock than I expected, right? I did not emigrate for bread, but for the desire to change my environment. It was so much easier here that I already had, I have a family here, my father’s sister, my cousins, and my cousins were born here, and my aunt has lived here for 50 years, and friends with whom I now partially cooperate, work together, together we are trying to have some influence on the British Polish diaspora. On the other hand, it was a shock that I had to cope with such a shade of upbringing in Krakow, where I lived all my life, and such an economic situation that in Poland, at least in Krakow, there were no friends, where I just had to myself to look for a job from scratch, and not even rent a room, but to share a room with someone simply because of the situation in which I was.”

Proud to be Polish

“I mean, I’m proud to be Polish, especially now, when Poles help during this war, especially people from Ukraine. Well, I can even tell you honestly in the shop, when they hear that I am Polish, it’s a good job, it’s nice that Poles are helping. Well, as I say, I am proud of it, I am glad to be Polish, but, as I say, I must admit that life in England is certainly easier than life in Poland.”

Fighting together

“I think that my knowledge, memory and such activity, well, patriotic and historical, have been strengthened here. That’s for sure. Because I simply delved into these things here, and not only that, this is where my uncle fought here. I also got to know this story more widely, here of Poles and Brits fighting together, working together. And it is, in my opinion, very interesting.”



Otherness is still marked

“Sometimes somewhere out there ... we miss a conversation because, I don’t know, we didn’t watch the same programs growing up. And so on and so on, so this one, so this otherness is still marked like that somewhere, I am not saying that... it is a negative phenomenon, but still. We are not, and I guess ... then to some extent most of us will never be, you know, merged with this society, well, it will not be such a homogeneous entity. But that’s not the goal either, is it?”

We cannot escape from memory

“I think that our memory, well, Polish collective memory contains many traumas related to the past, so the experience of living in our country, in Poland, is something that I think many people, hmm, are able to share, hence for example, the need for freedom of movement. Which was taken away from us all by about fifty years of the totalitarian system. We cannot escape from memory. They are not... they are connected with memory, they are connected with tradition, so we must define what this tradition is. Tradition is a sequence of generations, it is the continuity of statehood and social continuity, a chain of which we are part.”

Better version of yourself

“Being in Poland, you are, you are just yourself, and ... being here I think that, I’m not saying that you have to be such a better version of yourself, but, but, just by the fact that you are constantly being assessed somewhere. Well, this one, well ... because we are, I think that, despite everything, even though we are accepted, you know, in the workplace. And so on, nevertheless, what we say and how we behave, there is always a voice in me somewhere in there that they always see us as outsiders anyway, right? Somewhere ... Of course they tolerate us, they accept us and so on. And that’s what, you know, I say, friendships can be made, and so on, but ... but somewhere because we have maybe a little different, I don’t know, sense of humor, just different experiences.”

“Oh, I understand well”

“Yes, it’s interesting, because despite the fact that we’ve lived here for many years and often have an accent, it’s something that is difficult to get rid of, and it’s always there, so there are always these comments about the accent and possible acquaintance or unfamiliarity with the English language amuses me a little, but also irritates me a little at some point. Because of course, you know, usually the English ‘oh, I understand well’, they understand everything, of course, right? How wonderful, you have wonderful English, much better than my Polish. And it is always such a situation that your English is definitely much better than my Polish. And I don’t know if that’s a compliment or the other way around.”

Sense of identity

“Our history of Poland, history of the twentieth century, how we were, how was this history given to us at school. There is an atmosphere in Poland, it has shaped positive and negative things in us, of course, but it has developed a sense of identity in us. Because I feel Polish. And I am connected to this story, emotionally as well. And it is important in this aspect that I continue to do so, despite the fact that next year I hope to get citizenship here. I cannot assimilate into a society that has no sense of identity.”

Purchasing power

“I am an economic emigrant, because while I was working ... but this is also, well, this is due to this, from this ... socioeconomic situation, I am a labor migrant, when I came to Great Britain, I just started to live more normally, in those days, when I was working in Poland, we didn’t have enough for anything and we worked, we lived on credit. Here, such a key answer will be the ratio, the purchasing power of money. And the possibility of... let’s say, living a life, well, please don’t forget that when I left Great Britain, from Poland to Great Britain, I worked as a mechanic. I worked as a car mechanic in Poland, and I do exactly the same in Great Britain. And here I worked eight hours a day, and here too... As I said, of course, it is the ratio of labor to... to what you can buy with the money you earn, that is, the purchasing power of money.”

