

Ukraine-Україна



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 Ukrainian migrants living in the UK.

Ukrainians have been migrating to the UK throughout the twentieth century, albeit not in substantial numbers before 2022. The 2021 census records approximately 35,000 people born in Ukraine living in the UK. However, since the Russian invasion in February 2022, the UK has welcomed more than 200,000 Ukrainian refugees through the Ukrainian Family and Homes for Ukraine schemes – in the latter, UK hosts offer accommodation to Ukrainians for a (theoretical) minimum of six months in exchange for a small “thank you” payment.

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

Ukrainian memory of World War II and the Soviet period is closely bound up with geopolitics and the country's relationship to Russia. On the one hand, there are those who see the Ukrainian nationalist partisan movements active during World War II as heroes, fighting for Ukrainian independence, and who tend to elide the complicity of some of these figures with Nazism (this is the dominant narrative in the western, mainly Ukrainian-speaking part of the country). On the other hand, there are those who focus on Ukraine's contribution to the “Great Patriotic War” of the Soviet Union, which defeated Nazism, but who tend to elide the severe repression enacted on the country by the Soviets (the dominant narrative in the eastern, mainly Russian-speaking part of the country). Memory of the Holodomor and debate around whether it can be considered a genocide are also important factors. It is in part this “memory war” that has allowed Russia to construct Ukrainians as “Nazis” and have this presentation seem plausible to the Russian public, even though Ukraine's current leader is of Jewish descent.

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Not the way it was conveyed to us

“As soon as I got to Poland, I found out when the war was in 1941, how the Poles suffered from the Russian invaders, how they suffered, and I could not fully understand, now this war showed how much the Poles suffered, this is what is happening now we have it in Bucha, it happened in Poland too, it turns out. I don't know how history was seen in England, but in Poland, the history of our country and the Soviet Union was seen in a completely different way, not the way it was conveyed to us.”

Increased gas bill

“And in one of the posts [on Facebook], a woman, a British woman, wrote that our gas bills had increased due to the fact that Ukrainian refugees had arrived. To which one of the Ukrainian refugees, as I understand it, replied that the question was a little wrong in that your bills did not increase because of the inflow of Ukrainian refugees, but because of the Russian Federation. Well, there are also such nuances here, perhaps ordinary people do not really want to delve into these issues, but they count their pockets, their money.”

You can write anything you want in history textbooks

“There was no internet, because the story was passed down to me through my parents, through my grandfathers, my grandmother told what she was told... There are British people who remained after the Second World War, and if they passed it onto their children, then they know the real story... I don't see here that grandparents communicate with grandchildren, they don't have this line of transmission at all. I noticed this clearly, because in the family where I live now, there are four children, the grandfather and grandmother come there once every three months, they sit on the sofa, that's how, they have no communication with the children, so they don't pass it on. You can write anything you want in history textbooks.”

No language, no nationality

“I believe that if there is no language, there will be no nationality, the language identifies us as Ukrainians. If we stop speaking Ukrainian, well, someone will start to ‘protect the Russian-speaking population’, maybe someone will come to protect the Hungarian people or someone else. Language is your heart, language is the most important thing that is.”

Don't work, don't eat

“I see a lot of people, at the very least, in Birmingham working part-time or a little bit, getting paid, and they're very happy, because it's the third generation, they already have a home and everything, and they're like that. In Ukraine, if you don't work, you don't eat. That is, in Ukraine, those who want to work live well.”

9 hours of waiting

“There was a situation when I got to the hospital by ambulance and I waited 9 hours for this ambulance, 9 hours in a general queue, the only thing they helped me with was painkillers and only then after 9 hours of waiting they provided medical assistance. In this sense, if compared with Ukrainian medicine, then of course Ukrainian medicine wins many times over.”

Discovering Ukraine

“Part of the British population, based on my own experience of communicating with them in general, before the military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, they did not know what Ukraine was. They guessed where it was and considered it a part of Russia in general, well, as a part of the Soviet Union... And that's why, of course, some, for example, this became a discovery, despite the fact that Ukraine is the second largest European country.”

Expiry date

“I was shocked by the attitude of my hosts when I arrived. They might have expected that some ignorant poor woman would come who doesn't know anything, at first it was strange to me when they told me what do you know, you bought fish and there is an expiry date before which it must be eaten. I'm sorry, I lived in a European country, I'm sorry, we are a developed country and to treat me like a girl who didn't even finish school is very bad. The attitude towards us is not quite adequate, because we are perceived as uneducated people, from some third world countries, we are not considered as a country that is developed in IT technologies.”

Broke the image

“I think it has changed, but I think that we broke this image, which, in general, about refugees, because before they all thought that refugees were all almost without clothes, hungry, scared, uneducated, but here, women came with their cars... Therefore, in general, we broke it, that we are not refugees, because we are running, not because it is bad to live in Ukraine, we were simply escaping from the war, and that's all... Ukrainian refugees want to earn, they want to travel the world, they want to achieve their goals, they want to live well, they are not the kind of people who will just sit on benefits. I saw somewhere that almost 50% of those who came have already settled down.”

Ukraine is Chernobyl

“Every time I said that I was from Ukraine, every time I heard words of support, and then that they worry about us and root for us, I was surprised, to be honest, I thought that they don't know anything about Ukraine, that there is such a stereotype that Ukraine is Chernobyl, Klitschko and Shevchenko, that's all. Shevchenko, who is a football player. That's it, that's all they can know about Ukraine, but the knowledge of the average Brit about the world and about Ukraine in particular turned out to be wider than I thought.”

Impossible to compare

“He [a child] came, he was surprised because the program [at a UK school] is quite easy compared to the Ukrainian program and the child shared his impression with our hosts about the program's simplicity. So, what I heard from them is that we have a bad education in Ukraine, that we are not so smart, when I started to say that it is impossible to compare, we just have different education systems, I was told: ‘I haven't heard anything about Ukrainian scientists or something else, but ours can enter Cambridge.’ I say - I'm sorry, but our Ukrainians, who did not study in England, also enter Cambridge, and I know several Ukrainian lecturers who teach in your English universities. It was offensive to me, because it offended the Ukrainian world, it was very offensive to me”.

