

Case Study 2: Basque Refugee Children in Wales

(Adapted from [Wales for Peace](#) *hidden history*)

The [Spanish Civil War](#) broke out in July 1936. The British Government initially adopted a policy of non-intervention (not getting involved or taking sides), However, particularly after the bombing of the town of Guernica in the Basque country in Northern Spain on 26th April, 1937, public pressure to provide refuge for Basque children mounted. On that day, which would have been a market day, fighter planes attacked the town, killing hundreds of civilians. This devastating attack sparked appeals from the Basque government for foreign nations to provide temporary asylum for the children of the area. The British government agreed to this, although they didn't supply any financial support for them. The Basque children had to rely on voluntary donations from the public.

On 21st May 1937 3,840 children, 80 teachers, 120 helpers, 15 catholic priests and 2 doctors all boarded one ageing steamship, the SS Habana, which was meant to accommodate just 800 people. They left their families and homes behind and headed for Southampton. When the children arrived in the UK they stayed at a makeshift camp at Stoneham in Hampshire



*Cambria House, Caerleon - home to some Basque children
1937 - 39*

before being divided into 90 'colonies' around the country, including four in Wales.

Of the nearly 4,000 evacuees, over 200 children were accommodated in Wales at sites in Caerleon, Swansea, Old Colwyn and Brechfa in Carmarthenshire.

Children who were hosted in Wales spoke of a largely warm reception in their Welsh homes. Some of them chose to make the country their permanent home, although the majority were repatriated to Spain.

Further Information

More information about the Basque refugees children can be found in the following blog posts:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/wales/entries/bfa63764-7bdf-38da-a26d-364365528772> and
<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/lifestyle/spanish-civil-war-refugees-mixed-1821503>

A film created by a young person from Ysgol Cwm Rhymni about the welcome extended to one young Basque refugee can be seen on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYGATBpYpwM&list=PLuBBByzmU3OtE00lcKi-wkaj2ROs1ywy60>

In this film, children from Clytha Primary School in Newport talk about a project they were involved in to create 'zines' about the experiences of Basque refugee children who settled in Caerleon:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAzh9GeJeBM>

Follow-up Activities:

1. Reading:

For children's books about the experiences of refugee children see

https://vpl.bibliocommons.com/list/share/82873109_vpl_childrens/515932057

2. Research:

- a. What more can you find out about the story of Basque children in Caerleon in 1937? Look at some of the following articles:

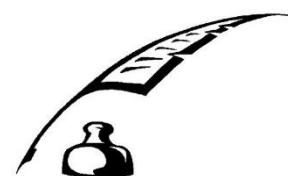
<http://www.caerleon.net/cambria/basque/>



col008.pdf

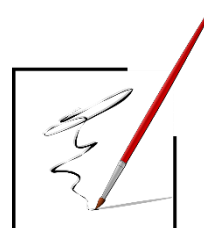
<https://www.caerleon-arts.org/2017/03/80th-anniversary-basque-refugee-childrens-arrival-caerleon/>

- b. Are there people of Basque descent still living in Wales? You can maybe find out by going to the BasqueChildren.org website (<https://www.basquechildren.org/>) or enquiring locally. Could you go and interview someone (with their permission) and make a small film about their story?



3. Creative Writing:

Imagine you are one of the children you have heard about today. Write a diary entry or a letter to a friend or family member describing your experiences of having to leave our home and family and travel to a foreign country - and how they make you feel. What was Caerleon like compared to your home town – the weather, the people, the food, the language, going to school?



4. Art:

- a. Look at Pablo Picasso's painting about the bombing of the Basque village Guernica. (See: <https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/guernica-art-lesson-11786365>). What does this painting say to you?
- b. Make your own 'zine' of your own home and family and the 3 or 4 possessions you would like to take with you if you had to go and live somewhere else for 3 months – e.g. a favourite toy, game, coat, book, drawing materials, music etc. Can you also portray in your drawing how you would feel?



5. Class discussion / Circle time:

- a. How do you think the Basque children felt about leaving their families and homes and being sent to a foreign country, where the language, climate, food and customs were quite different? What would you pack in your suitcase if you had to face such a situation? Can you imagine the journey on the SS Habana? What do you think it was like?

- b. How do you feel about wars that are happening in the world today (e.g. Syria, Iraq...) and their effect on children? How do you think these situations can be solved? Is war the answer?
- c. How can children and young people be part of working for a more peaceful world?

6. Music and Dance:

- a. The Basque children raised funds for their journey, by putting on shows, including Basque cultural songs and dances. You can hear and see some of them here:

[Pintto Pintto \(Pintxo Pintxo\) children's song in Basque Euskera de Canada Dean Zimmerman](#)

[Danzas Vascas- Basque dances,](#)



- b. If you had to raise money for an important cause or event, what traditional Welsh songs and dances could you perform? Could you put on a small show to support refugee children today?