

Jewish refugees in the British Army during World War Two

Teachers' Notes

In this lesson, students will learn about Jewish refugees who joined the British armed forces during World War Two.

Some refugees joined the British armed forces to fight back against the Axis powers. At first, the only unit that Austrian and German refugees could join was the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps (renamed the Pioneer Corps in 1940), an unarmed unit that provided manual labour for British units. Around 4,000 Jewish refugees joined the Pioneer Corps during the war. After the mass internment of June 1940, joining the Pioneer Corps was one way that refugees could be released. Tasks included trench digging, bridge building, and clearing roads. A training centre was set up in Pwllheli on the Llŷn Peninsula in 1940.

From 1942, Austrian and German refugees were allowed to enlist into technical units and Special Forces, and eventually, all restrictions on service were lifted. Refugees who served in the army were sometimes known as 'The King's Own Loyal Enemy Aliens'. In total, around 10,000 German and Austrian refugees joined the British armed forces from 1939 to 1945.

Curriculum links

Key Stage 4
History

Lesson Plan

LEARNING AIMS:

- To gain knowledge about the role of Jewish refugees in the British armed forces during World War Two, including their service in Wales.
- To understand why the refugees joined the British armed forces.

EQUIPMENT REQUIRED:

- Copies of the student worksheet.
- Transcript of the audio clips.¹

STARTER

On a board, write 'Nationalities of soldiers who fought for Britain in WW2'. Encourage students to write or call out nationalities that they believe fought in the British armed forces during World War Two.

Some notable answers: British (English, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish); Indian; Polish; Australian; New Zealander; Canadian; South African; West Indian (Trinidadian; Bermudan, Jamaican, Barbadian; Guyanese); American; French; Belgian; Czech; Slovak; Norwegian; Dutch; Irish; Kenyan; Ghanaian; Nigerian; Gambian; Sierra Leonean; Nepalese (Gurkhas).

Did anyone mention German, Austrian or Italian?

DEVELOPMENT

Herman Rothman, a refugee from Germany who stayed at Gwrych Castle in North Wales in the early part of the war, joined the General Service Corps in 1944, before being transferred to the King's Own Scottish Borderers. He later joined the Intelligence Corps and was among the first people to translate Hitler's original will and testament when documents were discovered sewn into the shoulders of a jacket belonging to Heinz Lorenz, Joseph Goebbels' press secretary. He subsequently wrote a book, *Hitler's Will*, detailing his experiences.

Ask the students to first read a short biography of Herman Rothman and then listen to [his testimony describing his motivation](#) for joining the armed forces. Then, working in pairs or individually, students should answer the following questions on their worksheet (**Task 1**):

1. Why did Herman want to join the armed forces?

¹ We added the transcripts of the audio clips, which you may choose to share with your students if you think they would be helpful. The transcripts are in English and Welsh whilst the clips are English only.

2. Do you think his reasons were legitimate?

MAIN

Herbert Patrick Anderson was born in 1913 in Germany as Helmut Herbert Fürst. At the age of six, he moved to Vienna, Austria. He arrived in Britain in March 1939. After the outbreak of war, he was able to receive 'friendly alien' status, which enabled him to join the Pioneer Corps. He was stationed in Le Havre in France from March 1940 but returned to Britain following the retreat at Dunkirk. He was relocated to Wales and was lucky to escape from an accident involving a land mine at Pembroke Dock which killed 19 servicemen, including three German-Jewish refugees. His unit was then relocated to Carmarthen. He later served in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, and became a British citizen in 1947. Herbert died in Norfolk in 2004.

Ask the students to first read a short biography of Herbert Patrick Anderson and then listen to a [clip, where he describes his time in Carmarthenshire with the Pioneer Corps](#). Then, working in pairs or individually, students should answer the following questions on their worksheet **(Task 2)**:

1. Would service in the Pioneer Corps have been disappointing for refugees?
2. How might the local population have reacted to the presence of Germans and Austrians in the British armed forces?

One of the best-known units made up of foreign nationals was No. 3 Troop of No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando, nicknamed "X Troop", which was stationed at Aberdyfi, Gwynedd. This elite group, which included 87 German-speaking refugees, trained in camouflage, street fighting, housebreaking and lockpicking in the rough terrain of Snowdonia. Mostly Jews, they had to change their names and adopt different personas in case they were captured behind enemy lines.

Colin Edward Anson was born Claus Leopold Octavio Ascher in Berlin in 1922. His father was arrested by the Nazis and died in the Dachau concentration camp in 1937. Colin fled to Britain on the Kindertransport in February 1939. He avoided internment and joined the Pioneer Corps, before being transferred to X Troop. He was badly injured serving in Sicily in 1943. Following a brain operation, he re-joined his unit and fought in [former] Yugoslavia and Italy. After the war, he worked in Germany during the denazification process. He married fellow refugee Alice Gross and worked for various travel companies in London. He died in 2016.²

Ask the students to first read a short biography of Colin Edward Anson and then listen to [his testimony describing how he changed his name to join X Troop](#). Then, working in pairs or individually, students should answer the following questions on their worksheet **(Task 3)**:

² The Newsroom, 'Obituary: Colin and Alice Anson', in *The Scotsman*, 19 July 2016 <<https://www.scotsman.com/news/obituary-colin-and-alice-anson-1471868>> [accessed 15 August 2022].

1. How might you feel if you were a refugee asked to join an elite unit in the armed forces?
2. Would changing your name be an issue for you? Explain why.
3. If you had to change your name, what name would you choose?

PLENARY

Ask students to consider the following questions and discuss them as a class:

1. World War 2 has been described as a 'just' war. What do you understand this to mean?
2. Do you think Jews were justified in fighting for the Allies?
3. Under what circumstances would you feel justified to take up arms?

Sources.

Commando Veterans Archive, *X Troop at Aberdyfi, 1943*

<<http://gallery.commandoveterans.org/cdoGallery/v/units/10IA/x+troop/3+troop+photos/3-Troop+10+ IA +Cdo+pic3.JPG.html>> [accessed 15 August 2022]

Fry, Helen, *Churchill's German Army: The Germans who Fought for Britain in World War Two* (Cheltenham: The History Press, 2009)

Garrett, Leah, *X Troop: The Secret Jewish Commandos of World War II* (London: HMH Books, 2021)

Kern, Steven, *Jewish Refugees from Germany and Austria in the British Army, 1939-45* (doctoral thesis, University of Nottingham, 2014) <<http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/12964/>> [accessed 15 August 2022]

Leighton-Langer, Peter, *The King's Own Loyal Enemy Aliens: German and Austrian Refugees in Britain's Armed Forces, 1939-45* (Elstree: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006)

Refugees from National Socialism in Wales, *Refugees and Service in the Armed Forces* <<https://wp-research.aber.ac.uk/nsrefugeeswales/history/service-in-armed-forces/>> [accessed 13 July 2022]

The Newsroom, 'Obituary: Colin and Alice Anson', in *The Scotsman*, 19 July 2016

<<https://www.scotsman.com/news/obituary-colin-and-alice-anson-1471868>> [accessed 15 August 2022]

Transcripts

[Herman Rothman describing his motivation for joining the armed forces](#)

To me, I equated 'to conform' with having an easy life, and, and also, you learn how to dodge things if you can. However, I, I did think 'I am doing it for a purpose'; I think this is something which may be endemic in people like myself. You know you were fighting for a cause, and therefore everything you did was for the benefit – we were idealistic in a way, I had this idealistic thought in my mind – that everything I performed and everything I did was for the benefit of society, and intimately of course – inclusive [of] – yourself. If you want to defeat Hitler, you had to do that, and that is something which prompted me, which motivated me.

[Herbert Patrick Anderson describing his time in Carmarthenshire with the Pioneer Corps](#)

Eventually, I got to Carmarthen, in charge of a small detachment of about 20 men. Now we had a most ridiculous duty. We were to dig holes into the soil in various places all over the county. Into these almost man-high holes were inserted wooden kiosks and a seat, the idea being that men would be stationed in these holes, connected to each other by telephone, in the case of an invasion. We did the job; every morning we set off in a lorry, went to another place, all over Carmarthenshire, and wondering why, because who on earth, if you were Hitler or one of his commanders, would envisage an invasion of Britain by starting in south Wales? They would have to come all around southwest England, wouldn't they?

[...] Well, the Germans never tried it, and we don't know—we were... I am often wondering whether they're still in various places all over Carmarthenshire.

[Colin Edward Anson describing how he changed his name to join X Troop](#)

My name was a bit of a difficulty because there were various other people whose name began with 'A' and there was a tendency to pick a name in which both your surname and your Christian name would have the same initials—in case of embroidered handkerchiefs or what have you—and Andrews and Anderson, all the obvious 'As' had already gone. But at that moment, an Avro Anson happened to fly overhead, and it struck me as a very short and agreeable name, and a not very common name, so at that moment I became Anson, and the Claus in my original name became Colin. The middle name of Edward is purely on the spur of the moment, because Captain Hilton-

Jones looked up and said, “No middle name? It’s usual to have a middle name.” So, I simply picked that out of fresh air, and that is how Claus Leopold Octavio Ascher was made into Colin Edward Anson.