

Journey to Survival in the East: Soviet Jewish Life in Evacuation during the Second World War

Objective & Research Questions

The initial objective of my project was to examine the daily life experience of Soviet Jewish evacuees in the Soviet eastern hinterland during the Second World War. Over a million Jews from Ukraine, Belorussia and the western Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) (particularly Moscow and Leningrad) spent the war years in Soviet Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, the Urals and Siberia. Furthermore, thousands of former Polish Jews, who had become Soviet citizens due to the Soviet annexation of Western Ukraine and Belorussia in 1939, also found themselves as evacuees or recently amnestied deportees in the southern Soviet republics. This aspect of the story truly makes the Soviet experience of wartime evacuation unique because evacuees in the other European states were rarely resettled so far away from home.¹ While studying the complex journeys and trajectories of Soviet Jewish evacuees fleeing the Nazi threat during the war years, I aim to hone in on the experiences of evacuees at sites of resettlement in the East. I look at how evacuees organized their lives and satisfied their day-to-day needs in the harsh conditions of displacement and wartime scarcity. In particular, my project looks at evacuees' survival strategies and patterns of assimilation and adaptation as they found themselves in unfamiliar and strange environments. It is the theme of encounter – an encounter with different lands, peoples and traditions – that animates this story. While most Soviet evacuees never crossed the borders of the Soviet Union, they often migrated thousands of miles away from their homes and had to adapt to different climactic conditions, living standards and

¹ The only possible exception is that in the case of Great Britain, some evacuated children were sent to Canada and Australia.

lifestyles. Moreover, they frequently came into contact with local residents of diverse ethnic backgrounds. My goal is to explore how evacuees interacted with local residents, central and local authorities, and other evacuees. Moreover, my project examines the reconstitution of communities at sites of resettlement, interrogating how displaced individuals created support networks at their temporary homes.

This investigation has the potential to contribute to several different debates in the field. On the one hand, my study helps us better understand the nature of the Soviet Jewish experience of the wartime and postwar eras. In particular, I look at how the experience of evacuation affected the way in which Soviet Jews saw their role within the Soviet state and led to the growth of Jewish nationalism in the postwar period. On a broader scale, the study examines the relationships between minority groups within the Soviet context, revealing how the widely-propagandized 'Friendship of the Nations' looked like on the ground. Lastly, my project will allow us to gain a better sense of the repercussions of displacement at sites of resettlement. On the one hand, the destabilization prompted by evacuation reveals important fissures within Soviet society and the problems created by the state driven projects of the 1930s (collectivization, industrialization, government purges). At the same time, wartime displacement provided an opportunity for the Soviet state to realize long-term plans for further societal transformation. Furthermore, encounters and interactions at sites of resettlement allowed individuals to carve out new roles for themselves and new ways to define themselves vis-à-vis the state.

Research Challenges

As is often the case, when I began my research in the archives, I quickly encountered both obstacles to my initial research goals as well as new avenues of research that I had not considered before. Naturally, I realized that I had to amend my original plans and objectives in light of the material I was finding. The main challenge had to do with my subject group. Many of the documents I was working with were reports, letters, memos and notes filed by state officials having to do with the problems associated with evacuation and the living conditions of evacuees. Unfortunately, the Soviet state most often dealt with the general category of ‘evacuee’ and did not tend to distinguish among evacuees of different nationalities. Thus, it was very difficult to find information that addressed only Jewish evacuees specifically. One way to do so would be by looking at letters sent in by Jewish evacuees. However, once I began to peruse letters from evacuees received by Communist party authorities in Kazakhstan, I realized that most of them reflected similar concerns and problems, which led me to reconsider my initial assumption that Jewish evacuees had a distinct experience. While Jewish evacuees did face particular challenges unique to them, I felt that by expanding my project to include the evacuee population as a whole I could analyze the evacuee experience from several different angles (i.e. gender and class) and not simply through the prism of ethnicity.

Preliminary Findings

Living Conditions at Sites of Resettlement

My examination of countless reports and letters in archives both in Moscow and Almaty painted a very disturbing image of the kinds of living conditions evacuees confronted at sites of resettlement. The transfer of evacuees across the wide expanses of the Soviet Union was badly

organized and chaotic. Upon the outbreak of the war, few preparations were in place for evacuation since it was assumed that the Soviet Union would be on the offensive, not the defensive, in any future wars. In the western regions of the USSR orders to evacuate were often not issued until it was too late. Fleeing from an incredibly rapid Nazi advance, evacuees had little time to pack their belongings. A report from the town of Rechitsy in the Gomel region (southeastern Belarus) noted that “evacuation was carried out in a disorganized fashion and created panic.” As a result, part of the population ended up being ferried across the Dnieper, others left on foot, and the rest returned to the city because there was not enough space for them on the boats.² Trains filled with evacuees often did not have orders about their final destination; they were simply sent “to the rear,”³ which, needless to say, created a great deal of confusion about where they were to be received. Evacuees were on the road for weeks and months at a time and, more often than not, were in a very sad state when they arrived – exhausted, ill and penniless.

Unfortunately, for many, conditions would not improve markedly upon their arrival. Local authorities at sites of resettlement were ill-prepared to receive this influx of impoverished people, especially given wartime shortages and requisitions. Time and time again evacuees would complain about the difficulty of finding housing and gaining access to food, clothes and shoes. When the Ministry of State Control investigated the living conditions of evacuees in East Kazakhstan in May 1942, they found that eight families were living in “damp, dark, dilapidated huts that are not fit for habitation with stoves that were broken and falling apart.”⁴ Other times, evacuees were forced to live in barns with the cattle. Due to the lack of available housing,

² Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), Fond 17, opis 122, delo 10, list 14-15. All translations are my own.

³ The exact expression in Russian is “v glub’ strany” – it does not have a clear and accurate translation in English.

⁴ Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Fond 1430, opis 3, delo 192, list 31.

evacuees were often settled with local residents who were deemed to have ‘extra living space’ that they could share. Not surprisingly, this often resulted in bitter conflicts between the original residents and the newcomers. In the most egregious situations local residents, angry at having to share their apartments and houses with evacuees, threatened, abused and evicted the evacuees or intentionally broke stoves in order to force the evacuees to leave. In a disturbing incident in Alma-Ata, an evacuee was locked in a room and two men tried to throw him out of the window; adding insult to injury, the culprits held responsible posts in the local municipal organizations.⁵

Time and again reports reiterate that evacuees had a hard time finding jobs, particularly those that matched their qualifications; moreover, the lack of appropriate clothing and shoes made it very difficult for evacuees to work even if they were able to secure positions. Local authorities were hesitant to offer jobs to evacuees, whom they often saw as ‘foreign,’ untrustworthy, and temporary residents who could not be expected to stick around. Searching for a job in Alma-Ata, a Jewish evacuee was told everywhere that “we have enough of our own people.”⁶ The response of the party secretary of a district in the Omsk region to a request to hire evacuated teachers is indicative – ‘we don’t need import.’⁷ A highly trained evacuee from Moscow who was sent to Alma-Ata was deeply troubled by his failed search for employment, relating that he had been told everywhere “You are not one of ours, we only help out our own.”⁸ Moreover, many evacuees were resettled in rural areas and on collective farms. This was intentional – cities were overcrowded and the farms were desperately in need of labor. However, most evacuees were from urban regions and were ill-prepared for farm work. Understandably, lack of resources coupled with unemployment meant that evacuees had a difficult time feeding

⁵ Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (APRK), Fond 725, opis 4, delo 340, list 7.

⁶ APRK, Fond 708, opis 6/2, delo 206, list 198.

⁷ GARF, Fond A327, opis 2, delo 30, list 14.

⁸ APRK, Fond 708, opis 6/2, delo 212, list 19-20.

their families. Given these conditions, it is not surprising that a statistical report from 1941 indicated that evacuees accounted for 33% of all deaths in the South Kazakhstan region during the month of November and a whopping 42% of all deaths in the Dzhambul region of Kazakhstan for that month.⁹

Misuse of Funds

Of course, one of the main lessons we can derive from this situation is an obvious one – lack of preparation and organization on the part of the state resulted in the miserable living conditions of evacuees at sites of resettlement. Moreover, conflicts and tensions between evacuees and locals were natural given the lack of resources. However, one of the main factors in creating this situation was not only the lack of funds to support evacuees, but their misuse at the local level. In the fall of 1941, central authorities did release a significant amount of funding to provide evacuees with necessary living conditions; for instance, between July and December of 1941 the Soviet of National Commissars of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic received 36 million rubles for rendering aid to evacuees.¹⁰ However, widespread corruption meant that evacuees were unable to access much of it. In North Kazakhstan, the director of the political department of a Motor and Tractor Station demanded that boots that had been allocated for evacuees be handed over to her because she argued that they were actually designated for the local party leadership.¹¹ Central authorities were chagrined to discover that funds allocated for housing construction for evacuees had not been used due to shortages of laborers and construction materials as well as the general disinterest of regional and city authorities in this project. More often than not, funds and products released for evacuees were either distributed

⁹ APRK, Fond 708, opis 6/2, delo 125, list 90.

¹⁰ State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Fond 8131, opis 37, delo 786, list 219.

¹¹ APRK, Fond 708, opis 6/2, delo 203, list 142-149.

among local party cadres or released/sold to the general population. Investigating the evacuation department in the Chkalov region, authorities found that it was practically impossible to establish where the funds allocated for evacuees had gone and only managed to ascertain that the felt boots designated for the evacuees had been distributed among various municipal facilities.¹²

Some of the reasons for this situation were disorganization and poor communication; however, it is also the case that local authorities often intentionally kept these products away from the evacuees and distributed them among their own people. Though evacuees had never crossed the borders of the USSR, they were still considered to be, to one degree or another, strangers, and authorities were loath to release scarce goods to them, no matter what was stipulated in the decrees. In Kuibyshev region, stores were supposed to allocate 10% of the goods to evacuees, but the head of an industrial cooperative stated that “it makes absolutely no difference to me whom the regional executive committee wants to clothe: evacuees or poor people, my job is to deliver the finished product and that is all.”¹³ In many cases when goods arrived the organs in charge of distribution did not pay much attention to the intended recipients. Furthermore, authorities felt they had the right to do with the evacuees as they pleased and that orders relating to evacuees could be ignored as long as industries and farms continued to produce the necessary goods needed by the state. Thus, local authorities’ actions can be explained by their unwillingness to privilege evacuees over ‘their own’ coupled with their sense that decrees regarding evacuees were of secondary (or tertiary) importance. In a letter from the Cheliabinsk region, the evacuees explained that the director of the local state farm refuses to give them the products allotted to them and brazenly tells them that no matter how much they complain, he will do as he pleases because no one really controls the implementation of these orders on the ground.

¹² GARF, Fond A339, opis 1, delo 257, list 10-11.

¹³ RGASPI, Fond 17, opis 122, delo 21, list 96ob.

As they relate, “he calls all the decrees ‘scraps of paper’ and affirms that now ‘power is in the locality.’”¹⁴ Perhaps this attitude is not surprising but the degree of localism and antipathy towards outsiders in a situation in which these outsiders were not foreigners is significant. It is also an important lesson to bear in mind when considering contemporary cases of displacement both in this region and elsewhere.

Perceptions of Evacuees

The nature of this contentious encounter between evacuees and local residents and the reasons that account for it is a main theme in my research. By examining documents that allowed me to look at the situation from different perspectives – that of evacuees, local and central authorities and local residents, I was able to develop some hypotheses to better understand the terms of this encounter.

Anti-Semitism

On the one hand, ethnic and linguistic differences certainly played an important role in creating tensions between evacuees and locals. A significant portion of evacuees were Jews and they were resettled in regions where few Jews had lived before, which prompted both outright hostility and widespread cases of misunderstanding.¹⁵ Documents that I examined in both Moscow and Almaty describe cases of anti-Semitism that range from verbal outbursts to physical violence and pogroms. Jewish evacuees were accused of wanting to live off of the hard work of

¹⁴ GARF, Fond 9542, opis 8, delo 20, list 312.

¹⁵ Exact percentages are very difficult to establish due to the lack of accurate data about numbers of evacuees. A rough estimate would be that Jews comprised 6-9% of the evacuee population. However, it is important to note that this percentage varied widely from area to area and I have seen documents that indicate that in some regions Jews comprised the majority of the evacuee population. In his article, Vadim Dubson estimates that there were 1 million Jewish evacuees. See Vadim Dubson, “On the Problem of the Evacuation of Soviet Jews in 1941 (New Archival Sources),” *Jews in Eastern Europe* 3, no.40 (1999): 37-56.) A rough estimate of the total number of evacuees is approximately 16.5 million. See Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009)

locals in the East and of having caused wartime inflation. Some went as far as telling Jewish evacuees that it would have been better if they had been killed by Hitler. In a letter to the first secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, an evacuee described several signs of growing anti-Semitism in Alma-Ata in the fall of 1941: the appearance of a flyer near the opera theater encouraging its readers to ‘beat the Jews’ and the disheartening stories of her acquaintances relating that many local residents were refusing to rent out rooms to Jews. At the local market she overheard people claiming that there were so many Jews in Uzbekistan that “the republic is now called Evreistan (Jewishstan)”.¹⁶ In schools, Jewish children were often ridiculed for their different pronunciation. In the Tatar autonomous republic a Jewish family was repeatedly harassed with teenagers throwing rocks at their windows.¹⁷ In the fall of 1942, *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda* (the central republican newspaper) received a very disturbing letter describing how an incoming collective farm director had, with the help of other local residents, evicted the Jewish evacuee families living on the collective farm.¹⁸ In Kazakhstan, the situation became so problematic that in August of 1942 the republican authorities issued an order regarding this problem and steps that needed to be taken to address it.¹⁹ Thus, ethnic differences certainly exacerbated existing problems – the scarcity of resources and the sense that ‘foreign’ and ‘lazy’ evacuees were living off of the bounty of the hard work of local farmers.

I would argue that anti-Semitism in the rear certainly made an indelible impression on Jewish evacuees. Jewish evacuees in Kazakhstan often wrote that it was the first time in their lives that they had encountered anti-Semitism. Moreover, it prompted some to develop stronger sentiments of national pride in their Jewish identity. In a letter to the Secretary of the Kazakh

¹⁶ APRK, Fond 708, opis 5/1, delo 694, list 54.

¹⁷ GARF, Fond A327, opis 2, delo 3, list 64-5.

¹⁸ APRK, Fond 725, opis 4, delo 359, list 1-5.

¹⁹ APRK, Fond 708, opis 6/1, delo 448, list 2-3.

Communist party Skvortsov, Jewish evacuees wrote: “Are there not among the Jews cultured, educated people who contribute more to the state than Russians. Why are we looked at with so much anger and hatred...Jews are much more cultured and poised than some Russians.”²⁰ The attacks against them prompted some to take a stronger stand in affirming the achievements of Soviet Jewry. Echoes of this sentiment reverberated in the postwar era. In 1947, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee asked Stalin to allow the publication of a Jewish daily in Yiddish with a circulation of at least 50,000 copies; they justified their demands by referencing the need of Jewish evacuees who had recently returned to their homes to have a newspaper in their national tongue. Moreover, the letter added, “Jewish workers show an immense interest in the development of Jewish culture.”²¹

Class

However, I soon discovered that there was another, no less important, source of animosity between evacuees and locals- the increasingly apparent class differences between the two groups. Most evacuees had arrived from urban areas in the more developed and affluent western regions of the Soviet Union. One of the main reasons for this was that organized evacuation efforts were largely carried out in cities, not in the rural regions. One of the draft evacuation plans that I located in the archives noted three main regions where evacuation should be carried out – the border areas, areas threatened by Nazi occupation, and the main urban centers of the USSR, specifically Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk, Kiev and Odessa.²² At the same time, the main regions for resettlement were less-developed, rural areas in Siberia, the Urals and

²⁰ APRK, Fond 708, opis 6/2, delo 200, list 151.

²¹ GARF, Fond 8114, opis 1, delo 923, list 145-7.

²² GARF, Fond A259, opis 40, delo 3028, list 82-74.

Central Asia. Thus, there was an evident mismatch between the backgrounds and socio-economic status of the residents of these regions.

This was clearly reflected in the perceptions that each group held of the other. Judging by their clothing and their demands, local residents often saw evacuees as spoiled, privileged city folk who had enjoyed a much better life before the war than they had. In a report from the Kuibyshev region, a collective farm brigadier is quoted as telling the evacuees “why did you come here, no one invited you. Before you used to wear nail polish, but now you will shovel shit (*der'mo*).”²³ According to the stereotypes, Muscovites were particularly spoiled and useless. When asked to help an ill evacuated woman, the director of a collective farm in the Saratov region replied “there’s no need to bother ourselves with them, they’ve lived well, now they can suffer.”²⁴ Due to the system of central provisioning, evacuees from western cities would have been dressed much better than average collective farmers in Central Asia or Siberia. Moreover, some, though certainly not all, had managed to pack their savings and valuables. As a result, they were seen to be rather wealthy and locals charged them very steep prices for food and accommodations and demanded that the evacuees give them their nicer clothes in exchange for food. Even officials repeatedly complained that evacuees were rich and demanding. At a meeting of the leadership of the Kabardino-Balkar autonomous republic in May of 1942, one participant noted that many of the evacuees have the kind of money that “neither you nor I will ever have.”²⁵

Evacuees themselves often became cognizant of the divide that separated their lifestyles at home with those in the provinces far from the center. As one worker explained, “while we lived in Moscow, we also thought that there was plenty in the country but once we arrived here

²³ RGASPI, Fond 17, opis 122, delo 21, list 99 ob.

²⁴ GARF, Fond A327, opis 2, delo 11, list 76.

²⁵ GARF, Fond A259, opis 40, delo 3527, list 122.

and looked around at how people were living, one doesn't know whether to cry or to die."²⁶ Still, evacuees saw themselves as victims who had escaped the horrors of Nazi occupation only to be experience cruel treatment and deprivation at the hands of their compatriots. Many of them had harrowing memories of life close to the frontlines (this was particularly true for evacuees from Leningrad who had lived there during the blockade). The majority had husbands, fathers and/or brothers fighting at the front; in fact, many letters penned by evacuees come from women who argue that, as wives of soldiers, they felt that they were entitled to proper living conditions and access to basic goods. After all, they reiterate, it would be unjust to let women and children suffer and starve in the rear while their husbands and fathers risk their lives at the front.

While locals accused evacuees of being lazy and unwilling to accept the manual jobs offered to them, evacuees argued that they had the right to make themselves useful to the state by working according to their specializations. Many of them were highly qualified and trained workers and were practically unemployable in rural areas. As an evacuee from Leningrad wrote, "after all, not only do I not know farm work at all, but I have never before even seen a village...my strength has given out from the awareness that I am a useless person here and from hunger."²⁷ In letter after letter, evacuees beg to be allowed to return to their homes in Moscow where they could find appropriate jobs and, in the words of one eager evacuee, "actively participate in the defense of my native Moscow."²⁸

These was a clear disconnect between the expectations, worldviews and perspectives of evacuees and locals that had much to do with the circumstances in which they had lived prior to the war. It is perhaps somewhat befuddling that class tensions would plague a state that had, according to its propaganda, eliminated classes. On the other hand, scholars have pointed out

²⁶ GARF, Fond 5446, opis 43, delo 1224, list 21 ob.

²⁷ GARF, Fond 5446, opis 44, delo 712, list 228.

²⁸ GARF, Fond 5446, opis 56, delo 4, list 104ob.

that, despite all the propaganda, Soviet society was very stratified. Moreover, I believe that my case study holds important lessons for both historians and policy makers considering the ramifications of displacement in different areas. First of all, it is evident that it was the combination of several different factors – such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status – that led to the tensions between local and evacuee populations. Secondly, it demonstrates that we must look beyond the more obvious sources of conflict, such as nationality and ethnicity, to uncover the somewhat less evident but oftentimes more important sources – such as class. Thirdly, I think we can make the case that population movements that occur within the borders of a state often cause similar problems and tensions as those associated with refugeedom. Lastly, I believe that the frictions that accompanied population transfers and displacement during the Soviet period carried lasting importance and may very well continue to have an impact on the situation in post-Soviet states today.

Presentations

During my time in Kazakhstan and Russia, I had the wonderful opportunity to discuss my project objectives and some of my preliminary findings at a couple of academic events. In Almaty, I participated in the 5th session of the international conference on Evacuation & the History of the Jews of Kazakhstan, Central Asia and Western Siberia organized by the Association of Jewish National Organizations of the Republic of Kazakhstan ‘Mitsva’ and the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan. At the conference, I presented a paper entitled “Research Perspectives on the Study of the History of Jewish Evacuees,” which has been published in a collection of articles from the conference. At this event, I had an excellent opportunity to not

only share my own work but also meet other historians and archivists working in this field and learn about their work. In Moscow, I am very grateful to the staff of the Russian Holocaust Center who invited me to use the materials of their archives and to share my research with the community. I had an amazing opportunity to deliver a lecture on my research at a seminar at the memorial synagogue in Moscow's Park Pobedy.