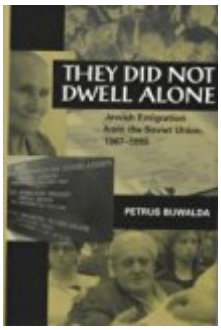
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Petrus Buwalda. *They Did Not Dwell Alone.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. 297 pp. $38.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5616-7.



Reviewed by David Shneer

Published on H-Russia (August, 1999)

Ever since the nineteenth century, a European government's treatment of Jews has been a test of that state's level of "civility" and "enlightenment." The idea of progress meant that nations could and should judge each other's level of enlightenment. Therefore a nation that granted rights to its Jews sat on a higher, enlightened plane than those nations that did not grant such rights. And although the treatment of minorities (namely Jews) as a test of civility originated in the Enlightenment, the idea that we can tell something about a nation by its treatment of its minorities has only strengthened with time. So it is no wonder that the story of Soviet Jewish emigration or the "plight of Soviet Jewry" has in recent years played a similar role in international politics as pogroms in Russia did at the turn of the century. Politicians, diplomats, Jewish groups, and others have used the treatment of Jews in the Soviet Union as a barometer for that country's "liberalization" or lack of it.

Petrus Buwalda, the Dutch ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1986 to 1990, has written a book intended to situate the West's fascination with the Jews of the Soviet Union in its larger political and diplomatic context. ***They Did Not Dwell Alone*** is a detailed account of the political and diplomatic history of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union beginning in 1967 and ending in 1990. The period under investigation here is not chosen haphazardly. Buwalda frames his story with the period in which the Soviet Union and Israel did not have diplomatic relations. During this period, the Dutch embassy represented Israeli interests to the Soviet Union in Moscow. It is through this lens that Buwalda shows us the twisted, complicated, politically fractious way in which Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union, and more importantly, how this mass emigration was shaped by political considerations.

Buwalda argues that to understand the political context of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union we need to understand diplomacy and the particular relationship between Israel (the primary destination for Soviet Jewish emigres) and the Soviet Union (from where the immigrants came). Thus, he gives a very skeletal history of Jews in Russia, and spends more time discussing the

shaky diplomatic relationship between the Soviet Union and Israel. He alludes to the very low emigration levels in the 1950s when the government simply was not granting exit visas. By the 1960s, there was a slight increase in exit visas that coincided with Khrushchev's Thaw. This introductory narrative culminates with the 1967 War, when the Soviet Union broke off relations with Israel entirely for its supposed illegal occupation of Arab territory. Israel then asked the Netherlands to represent Israeli interests in the Soviet Union. According to Buwalda, the Dutch agreed to this request, in part, to do penance for their failure to do more to protect Jews during World War II.

Buwalda's story, then, is two histories - the history of the Dutch representation of Israel in the Soviet Union (1967-1990) and of how the primary diplomatic issue between Israel and the Soviet Union, Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union, was negotiated over time. His story really starts in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the problem of the "refusenik" (one who applies for and is denied an exit visa from the Soviet Union) became an international political issue. Buwalda argues that the first "refusenik" was Boris Kochubyevsky, who was arrested and condemned to three years imprisonment for "slander of the Soviet Union" in 1968. The Kochubyevsky case is considered the first "refusenik" case, because until 1967 there was: 1) no real expectation that Jews would be able to emigrate en masse, and 2) once the possibility was in the air, the state responded with repression. It is this simultaneous liberalization and crackdown that set the terms of the refusenik problem from 1967-1990.

The Jews of the Soviet Union made world news in 1970 during the "Leningrad Trial," in which 34 men and women (almost all Jews) were accused of hijacking a plane at Leningrad airport, and were tried for "betraying the fatherland." According to the prosecution, these Jews allegedly hijacked the plane to emigrate from the Soviet Union and gain media attention. In the end, two of those indicted were sentenced to death. The severity of the sentences and the lack of evidence against those prosecuted generated worldwide outrage; in response, the state lessened the charges and the sentences. This incident put Jewish emigration into the international political arena. Thus, if the allegations of the Soviet authorities were correct, the accused succeeded in achieving their goal of bringing attention to their plight.

Before 1970 there was almost no dialogue between Soviet Jews and Jews outside the Soviet bloc. After the Leningrad Trial, some Jews in the Soviet Union became more vocal about their desire to emigrate, arousing Israeli and American interest. For most of the period under study, Jews who were granted exit visas emigrated primarily to Israel. For the state of Israel, Jewish immigration was (and still is) a matter of ideological import and practical necessity. Ideologically, Zionism is fundamentally a movement dedicated to bringing Jews from around the world to Israel, an ingathering of the exiles. More practically, when it was first founded, Israel's demographic survival depended on immigration. So the refusenik problem was central to Israeli diplomacy, and since the Dutch ambassador represented Israeli interests to the Soviet Union, the Dutch were also at the forefront of the international political problem that Jewish emigration became in the 1970s.

In 1971, Soviet policy shifted again, and the emigration floodgates opened. Buwalda explains this swing in emigration policy in three ways. Since 1967 Jews had begun clamoring to leave the country en masse, and the Leningrad Trial had given them worldwide media attention. In the early 1970s, Israel and the United States began applying political pressure on the Soviet government to liberalize emigration, but most important to the change in Soviet policy, he argues, was the Soviet entrance into the process of detente with the West.

This type of analysis exposes the strengths and weaknesses of Buwalda's history of Soviet Jewish emigration. On the one hand, Buwalda argues convincingly that one cannot look at just external (international) pressure or only internal (Soviet) politics that motivated changes in Soviet policy toward Jewish emigration. He coins the term "interaction theory" to explain the complicated process by which policy changes were made. He holds that "external pressure did play a large role in urging or even forcing Soviet leaders to allow Jews to emigrate. But that foreign pressure did not spring up by itself; it had to be evoked first by pressure from inside the country.

The urgent desire of many Jews to emigrate stood at the basis of their exodus. The constant refusal of the Soviet authorities to allow large-scale emigration, the harassment of applicants, and the maltreatment and persecution of those who were refused permission, in turn, generated pressure from the West. Buwalda's conclusion is, however, that "this pressure proved to be effective only when internal considerations induced the Soviet leadership to accommodate it" (p. xvi). And he believes that those considerations were primarily economic and secondarily diplomatic in nature.

This interesting thesis about the various pressures and responses to those pressures suggests that emigration is always a multivariable process. But in making these claims, Buwalda also exposes his focus on the Dutch/Israeli side of the problem, and his lack of research into the Soviet side of emigration. Buwalda did not use Russian archives for this book, nor did he attempt to interview relevant political officials who might have told him a different story. (Of the hundreds of interviews Buwalda conducted, only three were with Soviet politicians.) Therefore Buwalda can only speculate about the Soviet state's rationale behind its decision making. He suggests that economic crises were the main factors motivating a liberalization in Jewish emigration. However, to fully understand the reasons for Soviet policy changes, one would have to conduct research in the Russian archives and with the people who were making those decisions - the same type of research that Buwalda conducted on the Dutch/Israeli side.

After proposing some reasons for Soviet liberalization in the early 1970s the reader is then taken on a tour of the labyrinthine process by which a Jew (or any Soviet citizen) would attempt to emigrate. This tortuous process involved negotiating layers of overlapping bureaucracy and pleading for visas from at least two different governments. If after waiting in eternal lines, going through identity checks, and filling out mountains of paperwork, the applicant was granted an exit visa from the Soviets and an entrance visa from the Israeli/Dutch, then s/he had to acquire sufficient capital to pay the various fees and taxes that sealed his/her emigration. Thus we are reminded that the refusenik problem was just the tip of the emigration iceberg. Refuseniks were those who had the willpower, stamina, and connections to make it through the grueling application process. To be refused after all of this was the ultimate rejection. But this group does not include the hundreds of thousands who gave up on the process well before making it to the refusal stage.

One question often overshadowed in this high political narrative is a simple, but very poignant, one. Why did so many Jews, in theory, want to leave the Soviet Union? At the time, Western rhetoric about Soviet Jewish emigration stressed state-sponsored anti-Semitism, repression of Jewish religious practices, and restrictions on Jewish communal life. But Buwalda found that the Jews' desire to leave the Soviet Union was predicated more on a general frustration with the Soviet system of rule than with anti-Semitism specifically, although anti-Semitism was a manifestation of the Soviet state's treatment of its citizens.

This explains the "push" factors driving the Jews from the Soviet Union. As for the "pull" factors, initially most emigrants were ideologically motivated individuals who wanted to go to Israel

as an act of Jewish freedom. But most migrants chose to leave the Soviet Union in search of a more liberal political system and better economic opportunities for themselves and their children. Thus most emigrants who had a choice of destination chose the United States, which suggests that the bulk of emigres were not ideologically motivated. In the end, according to Buwalda, "Inability to exercise their religion seems to have been a motive for only a small percentage of the emigrants" (p. 35).

Throughout this history of emigration, Buwalda bounces back and forth between the local history of both the emigration process and the Dutch role in facilitating emigration and the global history of the international politics that shaped the process. Most important of these issues in the early days of mass Soviet Jewish emigration was the passage of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, when the United States legislatively linked foreign policy to human rights. The debates around this amendment first introduced the politics of Soviet Jewish emigration to the American Congress. The amendment arose as a response to the extortionist "diploma tax" the Soviet government charged to educated emigrants to "repay the government for free higher education." The issue made worldwide news and plunged the plight of Soviet Jews into the center of American politics and America's relationship with the Soviet Union . The Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which took three years to become law, stated that the U.S. government would not grant most-favored nation status, which extends credits and credit guarantees to other nations, if any such country denies its citizens the right to emigrate or imposes more than a nominal tax on emigration. In this way, Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union changed the nature of U.S. foreign policy by adding an extra variable to the diplomatic equation: human rights.

The Jackson-Vanik Amendment did not have a major effect on Soviet emigration policy. Or if it had an immediate effect, it was the opposite of the one intended. In 1973-1976, nearly the same years that the amendment was debated, Jewish emigration was quite low. This was probably a response to the Yom Kippur war and to the U.S. debates about Soviet treatment of its citizens, which the Soviet government saw as a question of domestic policy and, thus, none of the United States' business.

But from 1977 to 1980, emigration returned to high levels, and it is during this period that individual refuseniks began to make major headlines in the Western press. Just as the Soviet government granted new freedom to emigrate, it began a simultaneous crackdown on the ever-growing Soviet dissident movement. The relationship between Jewish refuseniks and the broader dissident movement, how each group overlapped and assisted/used the other for its own political gain is only briefly touched upon in this book, and is certainly an area for further study. Dissidents wanted to change the system and protest the government; refuseniks wanted to leave the system and not rock the boat. For those who found themselves in both groups, such as Natan Sharansky, the most important question was whether the two groups could find common ground. It was the fear that they might find common ground that ultimately drove the government to crack down on those very people who were creating links between refuseniks and dissidents (p.70).

The brief period of relatively free emigration ended in 1980, as U.S.-Soviet. relations deteriorated. By the time Gorbachev took the reigns of the Soviet government in 1985, Jewish emigration was at its lowest point since the Dutch began keeping such statistics. Fewer than one thousand Jews left the country that year. After describing perestroika's liberalizing effects on Soviet policy and Jewish emigration, Buwalda turns his analysis to the Soviet bureaucracy's response to these changes. He hints at a few internal debates within the Soviet bureaucracy primarily between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), which tended to

support more liberal emigration policies, and the KGB, which did not. It is a tantalizing morsel about internal Soviet politics but is not explored and Buwalda leaves the question of internal Soviet debates unresolved.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the refusenik issue was defused as more and more Jews were allowed to leave the country. The more pressing political issue for emigrating Soviet Jews now became which country to go to. In the late 1980s the United States liberalized its refugee policy and began granting refugee status to Soviet Jews still in the Soviet Union. This undercut emigration to Israel threatening the foundation of Zionist ideology and Israel's very purpose for existence, and aggravated relations between the two countries. In the end, however, the policy was revoked and by 1990, Israel was once again the primary destination of Soviet emigres.

Buwalda ends his story in 1990, when Israeli-Soviet diplomatic relations were reestablished. Jews were free to leave the Soviet Union, and the Israelis could talk directly to the Soviets. In 1990 alone, 212,000 Jews left the Soviet Union, most of them to Israel. Buwalda does not claim to be writing the definitive history of Soviet Jewish emigration. His expertise is clearly in the political and diplomatic aspects of the emigration problem. In that vein, some readers may find his explanation of the geo-political context overly detailed, and at times his discussion of certain treaty negotiations overshadows the main story of the emigres.

Finally, Buwalda's book is not a history of the people involved in emigration, the emigre organizations in the Soviet Union, nor more generally of social and cultural questions about Soviet Jewish emigration. Personally, I would have liked more discussion of the refuseniks' organizations, culture, and lives, or of the myriad groups in America, Israel, and Britain (not connected with governments and official diplomacy) that devoted themselves to the "refusenik" question.

In Buwalda's well-written narrative the politics of Jewish emigration is primarily a battle between nation-states --on one side, the penitent Dutch, who worked selflessly on behalf of the Israelis, and on the other side, the more self-interested Soviets, whose primary motivation for changes in policy was to gain economic and diplomatic advantages. The story ends when the Dutch were no longer needed, when the Soviet government began to implode, and when emigration from Russia became as massive a movement as it was at the turn of the century. In both periods, although individual Jews emigrated for personal reasons, Jewish emigration from Russia as a movement was always about bigger political and economic issues. And at both times, the Russian response to international pressure was a test of the government's degree of enlightenment and civility, and its worthiness of membership in the "liberal" Western world.

Citation: David Shneer. Review of Buwalda, Petrus. *They Did Not Dwell Alone.* H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. August, 1999.

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