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Albert Kaganovitch's *Exodus and Its Aftermath* is a welcome contribution to the relatively limited field of wartime displacement in the USSR. Additionally, the book provides a fresh look at the history of Jewish people in the Soviet Union during World War II by examining the war's impact on Jewish refugees from the USSR's western regions to its east. Kaganovitch argues against “the myth about the unity of the population and the authorities during the war, which was built in the USSR for many decades,” and demonstrates that “the majority of the locals of those eastern provinces responded negatively to the refugees” (pp. 10, 8). The hostility, argues Kaganovitch, was especially aggravated for the Jewish refugees due to widespread antisemitism.

The book contains eight chapters. In the first chapter, the author gives a wide overview of wartime evacuation and deportation policies and statistics. Kaganovitch paints a broad picture of the mass movement of people, often disorganized and riddled by conflicting directions of various authorities. He demonstrates that the authorities, reluctant to organize an evacuation at the beginning of the war, were more inclined to assist the movement of refugees as the war protracted. While providing a comparative framework for the Jewish refugees, the main focus of Kaganovitch's book, the author's overview of various groups, including deported Kalmyks and Germans, organized evacuees from Moscow and Leningrad, and Jewish refugees from the annexed Polish territories, makes a confusing read.

The next two chapters focus on the poor reception of the refugees by local authorities in the eastern regions. Kaganovitch demonstrates that Soviet bureaucrats at various levels treated refugees differently: “the lower their position, the fewer bureaucrats sought to adhere to the central government’s line,” as kolkhoz and village council chairs and other local officials were “overburdened by the care for refugees” (p. 47). When the refugees, often urban residents who lacked warm clothing and shoes for themselves and their children, fell ill and were unable to work in kolkhozes, officials were further aggravated. Work in
cities was scarce and difficult to secure; it was even more complicated for former citizens of Poland as well as refugees from the Baltic states and Romania, as they did not know the Russian language. Additionally, the well-being of the refugees was severely affected by corruption and theft of food and other essentials on the local level. In the dire conditions of widespread famine and disease, “a well-chosen profession and entrepreneurial spirit” were the key for the refugees’ survival (p. 102).

Describing the deadly starvation and diseases in the fourth chapter, Kaganovitch turns his attention to the remedies undertaken by the authorities and charity organizations. The author argues that, while expansion of vegetable gardens as sanctioned by the authorities helped thousands of refugees, it was too little too late, as the mortality rate in 1942 was extremely high. By 1943, refugees from the territories annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939, among them many Jews, had better chances of survival as they began receiving aid packages from Jewish assistance organizations in the United States and Palestine.

The fifth chapter focuses on children evacuated with orphanages and boarding schools or those who ended up in local orphanages. Through citing various examples, Kaganovitch demonstrates that their fates were tragic, as local authorities did not have necessary resources to provide for them; instead they put them to work and launched adoption campaigns. Across the country, evacuated children were lacking food, warm clothes, and shoes and lived in unsanitary conditions. Jewish children were in an especially dire situation due to widespread xenophobia and antisemitism.

Kaganovitch argues that the local population of the eastern regions was hostile toward refugees from big cities and western regions, including former Polish citizens, as they were urban and better dressed. Jewish refugees were met with antisemitism, which stemmed from a lack of familiarity of the locals with the Jews and various rumors. The indigenous Muslim population of Central Asia, including local officials, was especially hostile to the Jews, who they viewed as “parasites and strangers” (p. 166). The oppression, argues Kaganovitch, contributed to the growth of Jewish consciousness and religious identity.

In the next chapter on statistics on refugees, Kaganovitch demonstrates that Jews constituted a disproportionate number of refugees and the majority of them went to Central Asia. The last chapter focuses on the efforts of the refugees to return to their homes and the extreme difficulties they faced.

While the book is useful for scholars of both the Second World War and Jewish history, the monograph has a number of flaws. The author’s tendency to extrapolate single examples and case studies to make larger conclusions presents a serious issue for an otherwise fascinating book. For example, Kaganovitch argues that since the nineteenth century “in Russia, exchanging letters had occupied a more important place in the life of Jews than in the life of the Slavs” (p. 192). To support his claim Kaganovitch cites his own book about a Jewish community in Belarus, The Long Life and Swift Death of Jewish Rechitsa (2013). A curious reader might wonder—All Slavs? All Jews? What is the purpose of this argument and how do conclusions made from material on a prerevolutionary shtetl extend to the time of the Second World War? Kaganovitch makes other unsubstantiated claims, for example, talking about the “Stalinist idea of creating urban militias, composed mainly of minors” (p. 20). While most people’s militias in various cities were called to mobilize people from ages seventeen to fifty-five and included even younger teenagers, in no way were they composed “mainly of minors.”

One of the book’s other flaws is a lack of clarity when it comes to its geographical framework. While the introduction establishes its focus on Central Asia, many of the examples and statistics
come from Chuvashia. The analytical decision of Kaganovitch to not differentiate between various categories of Jewish refugees, including former citizens of the territories annexed by the USSR in 1939, is also confusing. Overall, while the book is important and valuable, its analytical and even factual flaws prevent me from recommending it without some reservations.

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