Ekaterina Timoshenko, an engineer who was almost fifty years old when the Nazi Wehrmacht attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, was one of the seven million forced laborers and POWs whom Adolf Hitler’s regime corralled to the German Reich during World War II. When the war started, she was working in Kyiv at a medical research institute.

How would Timoshenko explain to Soviet officials her choice to collaborate with Nazi Germany? The German invasion presented her with agonizing choices. Would she flee Kyiv when the German army penetrated Soviet territory? She did not. How would she cope with the Nazis making her work in a military factory where the other forced laborers were much younger, and the factory bosses, ignoring a medical commission’s recommendation of nonstrenuous labor, giving her the same work as them? To be sure, she had the good fortune of being transferred to lighter work after three months. Even so, when in May 1943 the head of the camp said she could return to Ukraine, as Seth Bernstein puts it, “her exhaustion made her susceptible to any proposal that would bring her home” (p. 62)—even if it meant becoming a Nazi propagandist. After training at the Eastern Ministry camp, she returned to Kyiv to conduct propaganda.

Timoshenko also had wrenching choices to make after the war. How would she explain to Soviet officials her choice to collaborate with Nazi Germany? Thanks to Bernstein’s superb research and efforts to “humanize the experience of forced labor and repatriation” (p. 5), we know that when Timoshenko was on trial in 1946 before a Soviet military tribunal, she said that the camp leader had duped her: she did not realize that she would have to become a propagandist if she wanted to return to Ukraine. Timoshenko’s “return to the motherland” was fraught with peril, just as it was for the approximately 4.2 million forced laborers and POWs who repatriated to the USSR. As a propagandist already in Ukraine when the war ended, Timoshenko did not have the option of taking advantage of postwar chaos and becoming a “nonreturner” (p. 2) in Allied-occupied Europe. As
with all cases of postwar repatriation, the Soviet state had competing agendas with respect to the returnees: protecting the polity from traitors and enemies, on the one hand, and integrating them into society, on the other.

Bernstein has produced a highly revisionist account of the forced displacement of laborers such as Timoshenko and POWs, their experience under Nazi rule, and their lives after the war. He rejects many of the basic assumptions embedded in the work of other historians who have written on these subjects. He takes as his point of departure the revisionist work of Viktor Zemskov, who had shown that the USSR did not, as previously thought, arrest almost all the repatriates upon their return to the USSR.[1] But among the book’s new findings are that “higher authorities in the Repatriation Administration were as often defenders from local abuses as they were facilitators of scrutiny,” and “even the secret police occupied a role between protector and prosecutor” (pp. 124-125). Most fundamentally, he breaks with the well-entrenched state-centered approach that has investigated how the USSR and Nazi Germany used the state apparatus to move and coerce laborers, shifting his focus to their varied experiences, hybrid identities, and irrepressible humanity. To a lesser extent, he gives the perspectives of Soviet officials involved in repatriating them in a chaotic postwar Europe. Whether he is reconstructing the relationships that forced laborers forged with each other (including those of different nationalities), with camp officials, or with the families with whom some of them lived, the choices they made once the Allies liberated Europe, or the ways in which they presented their wartime past in the postwar present, he assumes that “violence and turmoil created fluid identities, and, at times, agency in society” (p. 6). Bernstein rejects the assumption that in the postwar period, in which Soviet-born forced laborers could at times take advantage of weak state control and elude repatriation, “only nonreturners exercised agency over their fates and that most Soviet-claimed people would have avoided repatriation if they could have” (p. 7). His goal of restoring agency to the displaced meshes well with his use of Russian and Ukrainian archival material declassified in the 2010s, especially “secret police investigations of repatriates from Ukraine” (p. 5), even if those materials allow historians to know the decisions that the returnees made, but not necessarily all dimensions of their subjective experiences or the options they considered. We do not know, for example, whether Timoshenko was duped, as she claimed, into believing that return to Ukraine did not mean becoming a propagandist.

The first three chapters of the book follow forced laborers and POWs westward. Nazi officials recruited, duped, coerced, and displaced about seven million people of both genders (pp. 15-20). Bernstein is admirably sensitive to the differing conditions that awaited the displaced. Many worked in factories. But others lived with families, and some worked in agriculture. Wherever they landed, they had choices to make. Gender shaped and constrained those choices. Without demonstrating moral condemnation, Bernstein does an excellent job of showing when and why women entered into sexual and/or romantic relationships for the benefits they entailed, not the least of which was survival. He is also adept at showing that a given person could be both a collaborator and a resister.

The fourth chapter, which examines what Bernstein evocatively calls “wild re-Sovietization” in 1945, is one of the most interesting. By “wild re-Sovietization” he means local leaders’ creation of unauthorized, pro-Soviet political organizations and activities, including the use of “violence to reinstate Stalinist political and social norms” (p. 82). As Bernstein notes, forced laborers and POWs experienced “liberation” in a variety of ways. The most common experience, he says, was waking up to find their guards gone. The laborers and prisoners could then reinvent themselves. POWs such as Evgenii Kiselev, who was a technician in Mykolaiv
(Ukraine) before he ended up at Buchenwald, became under Allied control a “displaced person camp leader in Leipzig” (p. xvii) as well as a member of the Russian Workers Liberation Committee (RROK). Kiselev and his comrades were among the emancipated POWs-turned-displaced-persons (DPs) who held unauthorized trials of POWs who had collaborated with the Germans. In one such trial, Kiselev and others tried a POW who had become a camp guard. The jurors—that is, former camp inmates—voted to execute the defendant, who was shot. Bernstein argues effectively that when Soviet DPs invented the practices and violence of “wild re-Sovietization,” they “hoped they could return to the USSR as citizens in good standing” (p. 82).

In chapters 5-10, readers journey with nonreturners as they create new lives for themselves in Europe, with the returnees back to the USSR, and learn about Soviet efforts to bring the recalcitrant home, including after Soviet leader Iosif Stalin’s death. The Allies began to invent the norms and practices of repatriation prior to the end of the war. At Yalta in 1945, UK prime minister Winston Churchill, US president Franklin Roosevelt, and Stalin concurred that all Allied citizens were to be subject to compulsory repatriation. In theory, this meant that a Soviet Union intent on demonstrating its sovereignty as a postwar world power would be able to bring all its displaced citizens home. But the Allies stipulated that the USSR could not insist on the repatriation of Soviet citizens born in parts of the USSR annexed after September 1939—that is, western areas of Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and the three Baltic Republics. This exemption, combined with the chaos and lack of state control in the immediate postwar period, was among the factors that allowed some of the displaced to become nonreturners. Those who did return faced discrimination and, generally, limited opportunity, even though there was no formal order to send all the repatriates to the Gulag. Soviet officials tended to suspect male returnees of being collaborators much more so than women; men tended to undergo a “lengthy verification process” (p. 127) and were more likely to be put through labor mobilization. Soviet police subjected repatriates to surveillance and interrogation for years after their return, sometimes finding real collaborators and, in the case of returnees who had lived under the control of Western Allies, charging them falsely with espionage as the Cold War heated up. Soviet officials were also intent on bringing the several hundred thousand nonreturners back to the USSR. After Stalin died, Nikita Khrushchev launched the Return to the Motherland campaign, which sought to attract nonreturners to the USSR through “material comfort alongside spiritual well-being” (p. 216), and to thereby demonstrate the superiority of socialism over capitalism in the Cold War. But the USSR abandoned the campaign, whose results had been disappointing, at the end of the 1950s. At times, those who did return demonstrated their agency by “demanding to leave and airing their grievances to foreign officials” (p. 234).

But what is “agency,” the search for which is a constant theme in the book? Bernstein offers no explanation. He does cite Stathis Kalyvas’s work on agency during civil wars, but this does not resolve the definitional problem.[2] In various places, the terms “agency” and “choice” are used interchangeably (pp. 13, 30) even though they are not identical. At times he undercuts his insistence on agency by using qualifiers, as he does on page 80: “Opportunity was an important factor in collaboration and resistance. The strains that the war placed upon states gave Soviet-born people in Germany a modicum of agency.” Even if the word “modicum” does not weaken “agency” so much as to make it insignificant, there are other definitional issues. What is “wartime agency”? Wartime agency in authoritarian dictatorships? Where do survival strategies end and agency as “choice” begin? At times Bernstein seems to undercut his own efforts of restoring the “agency” of the forced laborers when he uses language that implies that if forced laborers and POWs wanted to survive,
their options were few—if there were any at all. For example, Bernstein does not really acknowledge that Timoshenko had no choice to make—her “exhaustion” drove her decision.

I was troubled by his explanations for the rape and sexual violence that Soviets committed after the Allies liberated Europe. Bernstein might be correct when he asserts that when POWs and Eastern workers became DPs and committed “vigilante justice”—such as the trial and execution that Kisilev and company engaged in—this was “a proxy for active participation in the war” (p. 91). And he might be onto something when he claims that when Soviet DPs engaged in “symbolic violence” (p. 92), such as when they shaved the head of a Soviet woman who was romantically involved with an Italian, they were trying to “reassert” their “authority” over women and were driven by “feelings of emasculation” (p. 91). But other than arguing by analogy to the historiography on postwar France, which has “shown how defeat by Nazi Germany and liberation by the Western Allies created a sense of lost masculinity among French men” (p. 91), Bernstein does not tell readers how and why he arrives at the claims he makes regarding actual and symbolic violence.[3]

Bernstein does not state explicitly that his goal is to grant agency to Soviet repatriation officials and other bureaucratic personnel, perhaps because the state-centered approach had assumed they had it. One can, and perhaps should, question Bernstein’s choice. In any case, he does not use the same concepts for them as for the forced laborers and POWs. “Agency” and “social agency” disappear when he writes about repatriation officials such as Vasilii Dragun, who directed Soviet repatriation in France and Germany after the war ended. Nor does he grant them hybrid or “complex” identities. Rather, he writes about their attitudes: “Instead, Soviet officials’ attitudes toward the returnees were complex, and discussions between repatriation officials and their partners in other parts of the bureaucracy reveal signific-

ant tensions between the goals of labor mobilization, reintegration, and punishment of perceived treason” (p. 9). While the book discusses Soviet officials’ attitudes, it does so in a way that describes them as if they were fixed. Had Bernstein assumed that Soviet officials had hybrid identities and emphasized the range of choices they had (as opposed to the constraints that Dragun, for example, faced when he sought to appoint administrators of Soviet DP camps), would this have enriched our understanding of repatriation? Arguably the answer is yes, assuming the sources would have allowed it.

Even the best books will invite quibbles about their use of concepts and theory. This is a rich and important book that deserves a wide readership. Bernstein deserves much praise for restoring the humanity of Ekaterina Timoshenko and many other Soviets who left, and in many cases, “return[ed] to [a] motherland” that was deeply ambivalent about their presence.

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Notes


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