



**Rebecca Manley.** *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. XVI, 282 S. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4739-6.



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## R. Manley: To the Tashkent Station

The Axis invasion of the USSR and the ensuing four-year conflict, like a maelstrom, pulled all of Soviet society into its orbit, leaving no one unaffected. Yet some major aspects of the World-War-II experience on the home front have eluded the attention of historians. Among these is the evacuation or mass transfer of Soviet citizens away from the front lines and to the safety of the country's rear. Rebecca Manley has filled this substantial void in our knowledge of World War II by providing a sophisticated well-researched account of government-led evacuation in the Soviet Union.

Between the German invasion of June 1941 and the autumn of 1942, the state sent 16.5 million evacuees, regarded as valuable human resources, away from the front lines. Tashkent, considered by the evacuees a foreign and distinctly Asian city, was one of the prominent destinations and constitutes the focus of Manley's monograph. Unsurprisingly, the peacetime ideological biases of the Soviet government carried over into wartime, and the mass of evacuees consisted almost exclusively of city-dwellers. For this reason, peasants are nearly invisible in Manley's analysis. Instead, workers and such promi-

nent members of the intelligentsia as Aleksei Tolstoi, Anna Akhmatova, and Kornei Chukovskii dominate the account.

The first two chapters on the official conception and planning of evacuation, though functional, pale in comparison to the rest of the book, which deals with the evacuations in practice, popular responses to the measures, life in Tashkent, and the return of the evacuees. Far from the highly controlled operation that the Evacuation Council envisioned, evacuation was punctuated by panic, the flight of officials, and the spontaneous self-evacuation of the citizenry. People frequently resisted evacuation from fear of the unknown and distrust of the state. Though the evacuated workers and intelligentsia found themselves in a privileged position in relative terms, they nonetheless endured the trials of wartime, struggling to scrape together adequate food while in transit and continuing to live modestly in their temporary homes in Tashkent. While survival was the name of the game, the evacuees found themselves far-removed from the war front and, as a result, became the target both of official and civilian critics, who questioned

their patriotism, and sometimes of their own consciences, which did not give them peace for escaping danger while others remained in harm's way.

"To the Tashkent Station" goes a long way in turning the mass of Soviet people, frequently treated by scholars as an undifferentiated patriotic mass rising up in defense of the Fatherland, into a collection of individuals with varying worldviews, aspirations, and attitudes toward the Soviet state. Although many people came to identify with Stalin and the Soviet state more than ever before, turning the country's inhabitants, as Soviet dissident scientist Andrei Sakharov observed, into a nation, this popular identification with the state was fraught with contradictions and tensions. Nazi propaganda sometimes fell on fertile ground, leading to the proliferation of anti-Semitism, opposition to the communist state, and defeatism. The reference to having "fought on the Tashkent front" became a negative anti-Semitic commonplace applied to those who allegedly shied away from combat, letting their Soviet compatriots die in their stead. Meanwhile, combating the negative popular image of evacuees was far from the forefront of officials' minds. Jews and evacuees thus found themselves supporting the war effort on the labor or cultural front while being mocked or resented by much of society.

Though Manley frequently deals with emotionally charged and contentious topics, she ably keeps her subject at arm's length. For example, she resists the temptation to judge the Soviet government for its many failings, noticing them only through the eyes of contemporaries. Manley's monograph presents abundant evidence of official ill-preparedness, disorganization, and often hypocrisy. Stalin, insistent on preparing only for an offensive war, refused to entertain any talk of evacuation on the eve of the conflict. Consequently, in the immediate wake of the invasion, officials frantically scrambled to the Lenin Library in an attempt to scrape together pertinent information on the Russian imperial government's evacuation policies during World War I. Civilians were keenly aware that Soviet officials simultaneously exhorted the people to sacrifice themselves in the name of the homeland and fled Moscow for havens safely behind the war front. Evacuees experienced various forms of deprivation en route to Tashkent, often waiting for weeks at train stations before they could continue their voyage to their destination. Manley presents all of these

shortcomings against the background of a generally successful mobilization of human resources and popular sentiment for the war effort.

In broader perspective, Manley's findings are consistent with Nina Tumarkin's claim that the Soviet state hijacked the legacy of the war, advancing the public veneration of the war in mythologized form to bolster its own legitimacy, while suppressing personal experiences that clashed with the official grand narrative. Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead. The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*, New York 1995. Official accounts glossed over inconvenient truths, and the evacuation, which Manley characterizes both as "a formidable Soviet accomplishment" and as "a moment of breakdown and betrayal", offers many of these. At the same time, historians of the Soviet Union would be well served to compare these findings with analogous phenomena in other Allied countries, including the United States and Britain, where popular lore, shaped largely by official representations, similarly presented a picture of social cohesion and unity of purpose to the neglect of factionalism, self-interest, and the divergence of perspectives during the war. See, for example: Jose Harris, *War and Social History. Britain and the Home Front during the Second World War*, in: Gordon Martel (ed.), *The World War Two Reader*, New York 2004, pp. 317-35; and Mark H. Leff, *The Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II*, pp. 336-58 in the same volume. Some parallels can tentatively be drawn between some aspects of the Soviet and British experiences with evacuation: in both cases, relationships between hosts and their evacuee-guests were tense and problematic. Such a comparison would provide a backdrop for the Soviet case and thus help bring into sharper focus its distinctive characteristics.

In this reader's analysis, the work's overall appeal is in its compelling narrative and sound research. The two chief focal points in this book, the role of the state and the plight of the people, could have been better integrated. As the people's experiences begin to take shape, official policies largely fade away. A bibliography would also have been tremendously welcome. These things aside, Manley has produced an illuminating and capable work of research which will be of interest not only to specialists, but more generally to those who seek to gain insight into the neglected aspects of World War II.

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