



Marcia Reynders Ristaino. *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. xvii + 367 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-3840-8.



Reviewed by Nicholas Clifford (Department of History, Middlebury College)

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Safe Haven? Foreign Exiles in Old Shanghai

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A few years ago, Robert Bickers complained that Paul Cohen's 1984 call for a "China-centered" historiography had been answered so enthusiastically by Western researchers "that the historians of the 'Shanghai school' have reconstructed a city history, in which, Japan apart, the 'exogenous'—the foreigner and foreign power—have been all but written out."^[1] The "Shanghai school," of course, comprises those many scholars, British, French, and American, among others, who have dissected aspects of the city's past, examining particularly the years of the Republic from 1912 to 1949. Whether or not one agrees with Bickers's point, there's no doubt that, stripped of its foreigners, Shanghai in that period, though perhaps hardly Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark, would still be a place that existed only in the imagination.

Marcia Ristaino's work here is concerned almost exclusively with foreigners, and only very marginally with the Chinese. Yet her foreigners are not the conventional Shanghailanders, so frequently and so easily caricatured (though not by Bickers and other serious students), who were the masters of the International Settlement and

the French Concession; nor are they part of the rogue's gallery recently portrayed by Bernard Wasserstein.^[2] They are, rather, a clutch of very different kinds of people: those who found themselves unwillingly in Shanghai, having gone to the city to find refuge from persecution and worse at home. She identifies her primary subjects as examples of what Robin Cohen calls "victim diasporas," examining, first, the Slavic refugees who reached Shanghai fleeing Soviet persecution after 1917, and, second, those Jews—primarily German and Austrian—who fled Nazi persecution, particularly after 1937. Complicating any attempt at a neat division, of course, are the various subgroups among these victims as well—Russian Jews who had earlier escaped the pogroms of the imperial government, Ukrainians who sought to maintain an identity separate from that of the Russians, Polish and other east European Jews—whose outlooks were often quite different from those who had been broadly assimilated into German and Austrian society and culture.

Moreover, not all Russians nor all Jews were refugees by any means. Though Ristaino estimates that in 1900 there were probably fewer than a hundred Jewish fam-

ilies all told in the city, many of them—particularly the Sephardi Jews from Baghdad—were well established, having arrived from India on the coat-tails of the British in the nineteenth century. Families like the Kadoories, the Ezras, the Harpoons, and the Sassoons were making themselves very much part of the Shanghai foreign establishment, despite the sort of “garden variety anti-Semitism” common particularly among the British (p. 112). Silas Harpoon, for example, managed to serve both on the Shanghai Municipal Council and the Conseil municipale of the French Concession—for a while concurrently, in fact, thanks to the oddities of the voting systems of the foreign settlements. To these earlier arrivals were added the Ashkenazi Jews, largely from Russia, some refugees, some not, engaging in a variety of businesses and occupations. And, of course, there were a handful of non-Jewish Russians as well before World War I, who were in business, or part of the consular and diplomatic establishment of the city.

By 1920, the Russians started arriving in substantial numbers, particularly after the Japanese withdrawal from Siberia in 1922. Many were White military men, showing up with their weapons, such as those who sailed in with Admiral Stark’s fleet in 1922, raising the threat of disruption to the city’s precarious stability. As their numbers grew, so did the difficulties of their predicament, not simply because of their poverty, but because of the diplomatic changes taking place around them. As Russians, they (like Germans and Austrians) no longer enjoyed the privileges of extraterritoriality, and in any case in 1921 Moscow withdrew citizenship rights of Russians living abroad. Beijing’s recognition of the Soviet Union in 1924, and of Soviet authority over the Chinese Eastern Railway, drove more Whites to Shanghai, and the brief Sino-Soviet war over the railway in 1929 sent another wave of refugees south. By that year there were some 13,000 Russians in the city (p. 53).

It was during this period, of course, that the common image of the White Russians was formed—men and women, living mostly in the French Concession, on the one hand proud, often laying claim to an aristocratic heritage, real or imagined, yet often so poor that they competed with the Chinese for the most menial of jobs (thus derogating from the notion of white superiority). Some joined warlord armies, others became bodyguards of the rich—Chinese and foreign—or engaged in crime and in prostitution, and still others took the places of Chinese strikers during the May Thirtieth movement of 1925. Ristaino, of course, goes well beyond such clichés to examine the ways in which these men and women

sought to replicate something of old Russian society on Chinese soil, describing the formation of schools, social clubs, churches, and musical and theatrical societies, all of which helped enrich Shanghai’s rather jejune cultural life in those days.

She also does a masterful job of navigating among the various groups that emerged, claiming to speak for the Russian exilic community, the situation exacerbated, of course, by the fractious nature of the group, the splits in political and social views, and the competition among leaders and would-be leaders for Chinese recognition of their authority. Most Russians, she points out, tried to stay clear of such battles, fearful of bringing down upon themselves the wrath of the Concession and Settlement authorities. Ultimately, V. F. Grosse, who had formerly served as consul-general in Shanghai, had sufficient character and standing to emerge, if not as undisputed leader, at least as head of the Russian Emigrants’ Committee (REC; formed July 1926), supposed to be an umbrella body over all Russians, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. His death in 1931, however, brought a renewed competition for leadership, and indeed it was perhaps not until the Japanese began to take control of the city after late 1937 that something like a unified leadership emerged, for the new overlords of Shanghai insisted upon it.

The Russian Jews, while technically part of the REC, nonetheless preferred to maintain a separate identity. Though Ristaino suggests that anti-Semitism in Shanghai was never a strong issue (as it was in Harbin, for instance), there was a natural legacy of distrust of the Whites, particularly with the formation of a small and rather ineffective Russian Fascist group. Nor did the Ashkenazi Jews have much in common with the Sephardic community, wealthy, well established, and generally well integrated into foreign Shanghai as they were. Indeed there were tensions between these two groups, the Ashkenazi, by some reports, seeing themselves as superior because of their white skins, while the Sephardi considered themselves to have stricter ethics and greater moral fiber (p. 25). Yet they too could cooperate and work with the leaders of foreign Shanghai as was shown by the formation in 1933 of a Jewish unit of the Shanghai Volunteer Corps, the foreign militia supposed to help defend the Settlement (in 1926 a Russian unit had been formed as well).

In any case, both the Russian and Sephardic Jews were to be outnumbered in the late thirties by the arrivals from Nazi persecution. The first shipload of refugees from Germany arrived in 1933, and the passage of the

Nuremberg Laws in 1935 and the *Kristallnacht* in 1938 hastened their exodus. Most of them arrived by ship from Italian ports; some traveled overland by the Trans-Siberian. Some thirteen hundred arrived in 1938, and over twelve thousand in 1939, before the war shut down many of the routes of travel.

Like the earlier Russian arrivals, these newer refugees faced the problem of trying to rebuild their shattered lives, insofar as it was possible, in what many of them regarded as a temporary refuge. Like the Russians, they too could be given to factional divisions and infighting, particularly between highly assimilated German and Austrian Jews, and the often more devout groups from Eastern Europe, particularly from Poland. Unlike the White Russians, however, they enjoyed the advantage of at least some help and support from other Jewish groups already established; and unlike the Russians at the time of their own arrival in the twenties, these newcomers found themselves in a city where the Japanese were already becoming the dominant authority and would, after December 1941, have virtually complete control. Many of these refugees settled in the northern reaches of the International Settlement, particularly in Hongkou and Yangshupu, where living costs were lower, but which had already been effectively detached by the Japanese military from the Settlement proper. There, like the Russians, they built little replicas of home, insofar as they could, so much so that over the years non-Jewish Shanghai Germans would go there to find the kinds of restaurants, cafes, and entertainments that reminded them of their native land.

Ristaino is particularly interesting in dealing with the relationships of both groups, White Russian and Jewish, to the Japanese, whose primary interest, of course, was control and stability. To that end they sought to reestablish the *baojia* system of communal responsibility, both for Chinese and for foreigners, and sought to put in place single organizations through which they could oversee such groups. They had little patience, for instance, with Ukrainian demands for recognition as a separate nationality, or with the Russian Jews' desire to keep their distance, preferring to group together all those whom the Japanese authorities considered Russian. The Russian Emigrants' Committee was generally their chosen instrument—though in 1940 and 1941 two successive chairmen were assassinated, by whom it is unclear—ultimately finding its leader in the White General Glebov in January 1943.

Japanese relations with the Jews were more compli-

cated. Although there was some of what might be called a classical anti-Semitism among the Japanese (helped, no doubt, by what they had learned from White Russian circles in Harbin), there was also something close to a philo-Semitism as well. Ristaino points out that Tokyo remained grateful for the American loans, arranged at the time of the 1904-1905 war by Jacob Schiff of Kuhn Loeb, and from that episode derived also the belief that Jewish moneyed and publicity interests (the Jewish “zaibatsu”)—not only in America, but in the rest of the world—might be turned to their advantage in the construction of the New Order in East Asia. Some Jewish leaders sought to reciprocate the interest, looking to Japan for support. As early as 1934, N. E. B. Ezra, a member of one of the old Shanghai Sephardic families and editor of *Israel's Messenger*, approached Shigemitsu Mamoru of the Foreign Ministry with a proposal to help in the development of Manchukuo by settling 50,000 Jews there, and though the offer was turned down, other Jewish leaders held out optimistic prospects for Jewish cooperation with Japanese advances in East Asia, particularly if Japan were to set aside a special region for them (pp. 96-97, 148-149). Yet as Tokyo moved closer to Berlin and Rome in the late thirties, these hopes that Jewish interests would help avert any dangerous confrontation with the United States began to fade, and in any case the influential American Jewish Congress strongly opposed any idea of Jewish cooperation in the construction of the New Order. Eventually the Japanese concluded that the Jewish “zaibatsu” was in fact harmful to Tokyo's interests, closely bound as it appeared to be to London and New York (Sir Victor Sassoon's outspoken opposition to Japanese helped in this impression).

If the Jews could not help much in the construction of the new East Asia, at least they need not disrupt it. The result was the establishment, in February 1943, of a “designated area” in Hongkou—not for Jews, per se, for the word was never used, but for stateless refugees who had arrived since 1937 from Germany and Eastern Europe, which meant that only Jews were affected (Russian Jews, being earlier arrivals, were exempt, of course). Here, for the last two years of the war, a ghetto in all but name was established, in crowded, uncomfortable quarters, although even here the Japanese never quite abandoned their notion that Jewish energy and enterprise could contribute to the war effort through the rebuilding of Shanghai.

As Ristaino reminds her readers, hard as were the conditions under which the refugees lived—particularly in Hongkou—they were in many ways a good deal bet-

ter than those affecting the vast majority of Shanghai's inhabitants. Shanghai's remaining British and Americans were also rounded up and interned in circumstances worse than Hongkou, while for most Chinese—many of them refugees themselves—life in wartime Shanghai was a time of penury, humiliation, and danger. Scarcities of food, medicine, and other necessities affected everyone, Chinese and foreign, as did the air raids, the threat of disease, and the inflation, already beginning during the war years, though only afterwards reaching genuinely appalling heights. The Jews of the Hongkou ghetto also benefited from aid—both from abroad, sent by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AAJDC), and from the efforts of Shanghai's Russian Jewish and Sephardic communities. Moreover, the common bond of Judaism—albeit in its different forms, Ashkenazi and Sephardic—helped build a sense of community under trying circumstances that made survival possible.

Neither of these groups—Russian or Jewish—did much to resist the Japanese conquest and occupation, of course, and Ristaino's book reminds us of the fineness of the lines that sometimes divide collaboration from cooperation or mere survival. Moreover, neither of these groups took much interest in Shanghai as a Chinese city, or in China's problems and prospects; like many Shanghailanders in more privileged positions earlier, they saw little mingling of their destinies with those of their host country.

The end of the war came suddenly, of course, and Ristaino devotes her last full chapter to the history of these communities in the post-war years. Many Russians, inspired by their country's stand against Hitler, chose to go back to the motherland—at least until reports filtered back to Shanghai about the reality of conditions in Stalin's Soviet Union. The Jews had no such clear way out; Europe was chaotic, the United Nations refugee organizations trying to handle millions of displaced persons, American immigration laws still highly restrictive, and Israel not yet founded. Eventually, however, they made their way to a variety of places—the United States, Latin America, Australia, and, after 1948, Israel. Meanwhile, what was

happening to Shanghai made the prospects for staying on less and less attractive. A few Jews and a few Russians survived the coming of the Communists in 1949, but by 1965 only twenty Shanghai Jews were left. In 1982 a Hong Kong paper reported the death of the last Shanghai refugee (she was Polish), leaving only one survivor of the European refugees—a Russian woman in Harbin—alive.

This is a fine, rich book, but I do have some quibbles. Obviously there are many difficulties in trying to keep such groups clear (and the author states her intentions in using names on p. 5), but there are times when the reader is not quite sure whether she is dealing with Russian Jews as well as Russians, or whether (as on p. 97) the term "Ashkenazi" is meant to include German and Austrian Jews as well as Russians. In discussing the collaboration (or cooperation) of the Western members of the Shanghai Municipal Council on p. 185, she says that they continued to serve for over a year after Pearl Harbor, not resigning until January 1942—but that, of course, is just over a month, not a year. Presumably Captain N. I. Fomin and Captain N. Y. Fomin of the imperial Russian navy are the same person, but they are separately listed in the index, and separately dealt with in the text. I am also curious about the way in which the American Jewish Distribution Committee—forced to suspend aid after Pearl Harbor—was able to resume it in 1944 (p. 202). And finally, there are places where a few more dates would be helpful to keep the chronology straight—one should not have to go to the footnotes to look at the sources.

These points aside, Marcia Ristaino has made a valuable addition to the ever growing corpus of books about Republican Shanghai.

Notes

[1]. Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900-1949* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 6.

[2]. Bernard Wasserstein, *Secret War in Shanghai: An Untold Story of Espionage, Intrigue, and Treason in World War II* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

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