Shelter from the Holocaust

Atina Grossmann, Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Atina Grossmann

Published by Wayne State University Press

Grossmann, Atina, et al.

Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union.

HISTORY
Millions of Eastern European Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. Of those who escaped that fate—the surviving remnant, known as the She’erit Hapletah—most remained alive because the Soviet Union had provided an often involuntary, and by and large extremely harsh, refuge from genocide. This volume investigates aspects of this history and its implications for more established historiographies. The experiences of Poland, the Soviet Union, the Holocaust, and postwar displacement and migration intersect here in dramatic ways. This entanglement has so far remained mostly unexplored. The chapters in this volume try to open up a new transnational field of research, bringing together histories that for the most part have been studied separately. Contributors focus in particular on the history of Polish Jews who survived in the Soviet Union.

---

Thanks to Eliyana R. Adler and Wanda Warlik for their substantial input for this chapter. Research and writing were made possible by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grant (DP130101215), an ARC Future Fellowship (FT140101100), as well as financial support from the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation (ACJC) at Monash University, the Jewish Holocaust Centre (Melbourne), and the Pratt Foundation, which allowed the contributors of this volume to come together for the first time in Melbourne at the “Dr Jan Randa Aftermath Workshop in Holocaust and Genocide Studies on ‘The Holocaust and the Soviet Union,’” 27–28 May 2015.
This essentially lost history has gone missing in the cracks among Jewish, East-Central European, and Soviet historiographies. Its traces can certainly be found, but have not made it, in any sustained manner, into either the standard national or Holocaust narratives. No one field has wanted to “own” such an entangled multinational and multilingual story, even as there has been a good deal of research on the Soviet takeover of eastern Poland, Poles deported to the Soviet Union, Soviet wartime evacuees, and Soviet Jewry during World War II.\(^1\) Nor has it been integrated into our own conceptions of what we mean by Jewish experience during the Holocaust or our definitions of “survivor” and “survival.” The story of Eastern European Jews in the Soviet Union during the war remains largely unmarked in museum and cinematic (including documentary) representation, two key sites of public memory and scholarly work.\(^2\) Even after the boom in Holocaust studies and commemoration over the past decades, the considerable (if often confusing, inconsistent, and scattered) information available in monographs, memoirs, and archives has not been systematically analyzed. Its status as a key part of “Holocaust history” remains contested and unclear, as does the definition of this largest cohort of Eastern European survivors; they are classified as “indirect” or “flight” survivors or simply folded into a collective “Holocaust survivor” category with their specific wartime experience effaced, mentioned, if at all, only in passing. Nor has the recent turn to transnational history led to a more complex, entangled wartime history of relations between Jewish and non-Jewish Polish refugees or with Soviet citizens of multiple nationalities and ethnicities, including mostly Muslim Uzbeks and Kazakhs, and Soviet Jews, including those from Bukhara. And yet—to many still surprising—the fact is that the forced migration away from the Soviet territories first attacked by the Germans provided the main chance for Eastern European Jewry’s survival. The fact bears repeating because it still seems so alien to the dominant narrative: the so-called Asiatics who survived the extreme hardships of the “refuge” in the Soviet interior and then Central Asia would constitute the numerical, if not the most visible or articulate, core of the She’erit Hapletah.\(^3\)

Around 1.5 million Polish Jews were gathered, along with non-Jewish Poles and Ukrainians, within the redrawn Soviet borders of summer 1939 after the Germans crossed into western Poland in early September. The majority of them had become Soviet subjects because the Red Army had
taken over their hometowns. Others had fled the advancing Wehrmacht into those parts of eastern Poland that had become Soviet after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939. Families faced wrenching, difficult, often split-second decisions about whether or not to flee, about who should go or who should stay. Grandparents often insisted on staying behind, whether because they genuinely expected the Germans to leave them unharmed or because they did not want to be a burden to the younger and stronger. In some cases, parents pushed their youth to run while they could; in others, young people defied the pleas of their parents to stay with them and instead headed for the riverbanks that carried them to the Soviet side. All these moves were made “in panic and uncertainty,” within moments, days, or occasionally weeks, depending on the changing progress of the battlefront, without any possibility of knowing the full situation, much less any inkling of what would soon transpire under Nazi control. Families expected that they would be reunited, and, in a familiar migration pattern, more men than women, more younger than older people fled, acts that would become dramatically evident in the demographics of the ghettos and death camps as well as in the composition of survivor communities.

Eliyana R. Adler’s recent research reveals the complexity of this rapid-fire decision making. While age and gender were clearly determining factors, depending on the specificities of place, time, and memories of the previous war, decisions to flee or not were generally negotiated within families; sometimes persuasive were grandparents’ stories of German soldiers’ civilized behavior in World War I, a father’s conviction that his business connections could protect the family, or a mother’s desperate sense that at least part of the family should try to escape. Certainly, there were “many husbands who left their wives and children to escape deportations to the labor camps in Germany,” and “not knowing that the Nazi ‘final solution’ was to annihilate every Jewish person, these men were planning to send for their families as soon as they could.” Sometimes the Germans forced Jews across the border, and sometimes the Soviets let Jews in or even encouraged them to flee or sometimes turned them back; by November they were demanding permits, but still Jews continued to run for their lives.

Having escaped the Nazis, these Jews from now German-occupied western Poland then, in 1940, faced deportation as suspect foreigners in
a land now allied with Germany, to forced labor in so-called special settlements in what is generally referred to in memoirs as “Siberia” but in fact could serve as a cipher for other parts of the vast USSR, including the Urals, Kazakhstan, and autonomous republics such as Komi near the Arctic Sea west of the Urals. Some Polish Jews who had fled aroused suspicion by registering to return to the German side, precisely in order to find family members who had been left behind; or because of false rumors that conditions had stabilized and were less harsh than under Soviet control, when, in fact, by March all Polish currency had been invalidated, leading to further desperate impoverishment. Others tried to return out of fear of being forced to accept Soviet citizenship in the “passportization drive” of 1940 or driven into the interior, ever farther away from their families and the homes to which they hoped to return; or sometimes simply because they could find no kosher food.

At the same time, in what had been eastern Poland, some local Jews—an arbitrary mix of merchants, shopkeepers, Zionists, the Orthodox, and the (only apparently) plain unlucky—who were just adapting, more or less successfully to novel Soviet rule, were also deported in four waves. These deportations happened in winter and spring 1940 and just before the war on the eastern front started in 1941. The deportees included refugees from the Germans and a larger group of non-Jewish Poles. While the Soviets were arresting Jews as “enemies of the people” or “capitalists,” the non-Jewish Poles who shared their fate suspected them of being pro-Bolshevik and disloyal, for having fled east from the Germans, for having seen or heard enough about the Nazis’ antisemitism and their actions in western Poland to prefer or even welcome the Red Army’s presence. Recalling his youth, a man from Chelm, just west of the border at the river Bug, asserted, “I had a good feeling about these Soviets. They seemed to exude strength and security.” In the bitterly cold winter of 1939–40, his father found work, and he enthusiastically joined the peer culture of the Young Pioneers, learning Russian as well as Russian Yiddish, skating, skiing, and performing in youth plays and concerts: “In spite of my constant hunger, I started to feel good about this new country.” Yet faced with pressure from security police to move farther into the interior, the family registered to return. “Luckily for us,” he explained decades later, “the Germans refused to accept the Polish refugees,” and they were soon loaded onto the boxcars that would save them from the
virtual total liquidation of all Jews in the region. As one woman laconically recalled this apparent catastrophe, “Little did we know that ours would be the last deportation train to leave Bialystok before the arrival of the Germans.”

Multiple memoirs and testimonies by Jewish and non-Jewish Poles describe the shock of this journey in essentially similar terms: the arrests in the middle of the night or the early morning hours, with at most a few hours to collect as many belongings as possible, and the lack of food and water or any privacy in the trains’ unheated boxcars, in which they were carried in fits and starts eastward under brutal conditions, which some—or many, again there are no accurate figures—did not survive. At times, when a parent or child disembarked at one of the unpredictable stops to barter or beg for food and was left behind as the train pulled out, families were suddenly separated, sometimes forever, sometimes until an implausible, seemingly miraculous but frequently recounted, reunion at another railway siding or train station. Some remember Jewish and non-Jewish Poles sharing the same car, with varying degrees of solidarity; others remember traveling in separate cars, but only for the Jews did it later become clear that even though “unimagined misery awaited” them, they were being inadvertently driven away from “certain destruction by the Germans.”

By this “twist of history”—versions of the term appear with telling frequency in survivors’ retrospective accounts—which intersected in complicated ways with the general mass evacuation (rather than “deportation”) of civilians into the vast Soviet interior after the German invasion in summer 1941, as well as broader deportations of non-Jewish Poles and other suspect “foreigners” (including probably 1 million-plus ethnic Germans), Polish Jews escaped the exterminatory German onslaught that followed the invasion in June 1941. As David Lautenberg (Laor), a young Zionist activist who in 1942 became the director of the orphanage in Tehran set up for the Jewish children who escaped Central Asia, succinctly stated: “The Soviet deportations were not planned to save Jewish lives. However, that is what transpired.”

Jewish deportees labored in factories, mines, or forests or on collective farms, enduring hunger, disease, exhaustion, mistreatment, and sheer shock and bewilderment at their sudden uprooting into completely unfamiliar terrain and circumstances. Trains dropped them off at seemingly
random villages and towns, where in the midst of forests in freezing temperatures, without any idea of where they had landed, they were enjoined to build new lives in exile and, in keeping with the motto of Soviet labor camps, warned to “work or die.” Guards and overseers announced that “those who do not learn to live here will perish” and, in a curiously often-repeated recollection, ominously predicted that, at best, “you will live, but you will never want to fuck!” Mostly urban Poles struggled to adapt to demanding and often dangerous work in an extreme climate, learning to fell trees at literally breakneck speed. Reports about relations between Christian and Jewish Poles vary, although the dominant tone is one of mutual mistrust and dislike, if not outright enmity. Conditions in the archipelago of urban and village settlements, collective and state farms, prisons and labor camps varied widely, not to say wildly, and it is especially the descriptions of the prison camps that use a language of incarceration more commonly associated with the Holocaust; people died, went crazy, became zombies (dokhodiaga), the Soviet version of Muselmänner.

At the same time, in contrast to the situation in Nazi-occupied Poland, these conditions did not specifically or exceptionally affect Jews but, to one degree or another, affected all Poles, Jewish and Christian, and in many ways, as war came, all inhabitants of the beleaguered Soviet Union. Families tried to stay together and clung to one another when some members died. Children were sent to school, where they were often better fed than in camp barracks or villages and where they learned algebra and recited Russian poetry while imbibing a Communist ideology that taught ancient history by glorifying Spartacus as a proletarian leader. Babies were born, prisoner and local physicians tried to provide decent medical care, and makeshift barter and bribe systems were mastered. Sometimes clandestine aid from Jewish Red Army or People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) officers, who revealed themselves by surreptitiously speaking Yiddish or mumbling a Hebrew prayer, made the difference between life and death.

Despite deportations, arrests, labor mobilization, and voluntary migration to the Soviet hinterland, the majority of Jews who had become Soviet subjects were still in the western borderlands when the Germans attacked on 22 June 1941. Some were evacuated as part of an organized effort by the Soviet state to move to safety essential workers and functionaries as well
as the intelligentsia. Recognizing that they were in particular danger, others managed to attach themselves and their families to these evacuations or fled on their own steam using whatever transportation was available. Finally, Jewish men either volunteered or were drafted into the Red Army and sometimes escaped to fight another day.

The experiences of flight, deportation, evacuation, and everyday life in the Soviet Union varied by gender and generation. As the chapters in this volume demonstrate, young men were more likely to flee the German invasion and occupation of Poland. And everyday survival both in the camps and special settlements and in the Soviet hinterland was defined by age and gender. Women had to take on much of the responsibility for preserving the life of their families, while men were more likely to be either arrested or drafted into the Red Army.

Destinations varied as much as the groups involved. Deportations and arrests moved people to labor camps and special settlements in northern Russia, Siberia, or Kazakhstan; evacuation could lead all the way to Central Asia or could end elsewhere in the Soviet hinterland. The separate groups of evacuees and deportees merged after a Soviet “amnesty” of formerly Polish citizens (12 August 1941), which led to the gradual release of most from detention. Their complex further trajectories led in various directions. Those released from labor camps or prison colonies were able to settle elsewhere, far away from the war zones. Almost all chose to head for the Central Asian republics, to cities such as Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Djambul or smaller towns, villages, and collective farms. Many remained in these areas until the end of the war. Some, particularly younger males, later took part in military action. The Soviets allowed the formation of an army under the Polish general Władysław Anders, in 1941–42 (sometimes referred to as the “Polish army-in-exile”). This army of 70,000 troops, including a few thousand Polish Jews, was permitted to leave the Soviet Union via Iran and later was able to join the Allied forces fighting the Germans in Italy.

By mid-1943, with the German forces on both the European and Eastern fronts now overextended, the Soviets proposed the formation of a second Polish army under General Zygmunt Berling that consisted of Polish soldiers and noncommissioned officers commanded almost entirely by Soviet personnel. These Polish forces, including several thousand Polish Jews, played a direct role in the retaking of Poland by the
Soviet military in 1944. In the process of pursuing the retreating German army, they were involved in liberating a number of Nazi concentration camps, including Majdanek. There were also Polish Jews—some now “officially” Soviet citizens, others not—who were called up and served in the Soviet army.

After the war, the Soviet Union sought to establish compliant Communist governments in Eastern Europe, including Poland. With this in mind, they announced a second “amnesty” that would allow those Poles, including the Polish Jews, who had survived the war in the Soviet Union to return to the “new” Poland.

For the tens of thousands of Polish Jews who came under Soviet authority after September 1939, life, as refugees and deportees and, after the German invasion, as “amnestied” Poles in Central Asia or serving in military units, was terribly difficult and sometimes lethal. But it did offer the opportunity for survival, a significant contrast to the systematic genocide the Nazis unleashed on the territories under their control.

HISTORIOGRAPHY
This history of how Eastern European Jews survived the Holocaust via deportation or evacuation by a different totalitarian regime—Stalin’s Soviet Union—has not found its place in any of the established historiographical traditions. Neither historians of the Soviet Union nor Holocaust scholars, let alone historians of Poland, considered themselves “in charge” of this history, which, at best, is pushed to the margins and, at worst, forgotten altogether.\(^{19}\) Scholars have addressed the 1939–41 period in the newly incorporated territories but usually have not integrated this history into a wider perspective covering the entire war. They look at the fate of Polish Jews as a local problem, not with reference to the Soviet Union as a whole.\(^{20}\) Likewise, the historiography on Jews in the Soviet Union during the war usually focuses on those who had been Soviet citizens before 1939 and does not connect their story to that of the fate of the formerly Polish Jews.\(^{21}\) The opening of secret Soviet and Polish archives, a growing memoir literature, determined efforts to interview the last remaining Holocaust survivors, and the growing interest in the histories of displaced persons (DPs) and migration are beginning to change this situation.\(^{22}\) The scholars contributing to this volume are at the forefront
of developing this new field of transnational study, which seeks to integrate scholarship from the areas of the history of the Second World War and the Holocaust, the history of Poland and the Soviet Union, and the study of refugees and DPs. There are four historiographical contexts for this integration: the history of the Soviet Union; the history of the Holocaust; the history of Poland, including the Polish diaspora; and the history of migration and displacement. These different historiographical traditions will be disrupted in different ways (and to varying degrees).

For the history of the Soviet Union, the reintegration of the story of Polish Jews could push the boundaries, quite literally, in the emerging literature about displacement in the Soviet Union and integrate it into the historiography of forced and other migration in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.\textsuperscript{23} The story of Polish Jews shows in an exemplary manner the extent to which displacement was not a Soviet but a transnational Eurasian affair.\textsuperscript{24} In a similar vein, the history of wartime antisemitism in the Soviet Union begins to look quite different once connected—as in Sheila Fitzpatrick’s contribution—to both the incorporation of the new territories in the west and the evacuation to the Soviet hinterland.\textsuperscript{25} More broadly, this history could also transform the narrative of what is still known as the Great Patriotic War. In this established Soviet and now Russian historiography, this war was a determined fight of good versus evil. The Soviet Union was a victim, and the fight against Nazism was quite obviously a positive achievement: the rescue of the world from fascism.\textsuperscript{26} That the continued existence of the Soviet Union ensured the survival of so many of Poland’s Jews could be read as part of this positive narrative. Yet this history also drives home the political and moral ambiguities of the Soviet Second World War: rescue depended in many cases on prior victimization (by the Soviets rather than the Nazis), and many did perish as a result of arrest, deportation, and executions.\textsuperscript{27}

Meanwhile, the paradox that deportation or arrest in 1940 or 1941 in the long run often meant rescue from the Holocaust might also be used as an argument against histories that focus on the period of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939–41 as the dark period of the Soviet Second World War. From a Jewish perspective, even during this period, let alone from 1941, Stalinism was clearly the “lesser of two evils.”\textsuperscript{28} Such a defense of the Soviet war record is increasingly popular in Russia today, propagated by President Vladimir Putin in semipublic meetings with
One can be critical of this approach from a Russian domestic perspective, but it does serve to complicate the facile equation of Nazism and Stalinism as equally evil because they were both equally totalitarian. This perspective has taken hold of much of Eastern Europe today, and it may not be a surprise that many in Russia feel insulted by this tendency. At least for Polish Jews, the differences between the two totalitarianisms were a matter of life and death, as a man we will meet again in Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik’s chapter noted. Michael Goldberg, who during his time in the Soviet Union transformed from a pro-Soviet youth to a fiercely anti-Soviet adult, nevertheless wrote the following in his memoirs:

Looking back to the East I could state to myself that the only positive note about the Soviet Union which we should never forget was that in the darkest hours of our Jewish tragedy, when the Western free world was deaf and blind to our destruction and kept all doors closed to the US, even turning back the refugees to Nazi ovens, the Soviets were the only ones who admitted hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jews who found a place of refuge. As an eyewitness I can state that in the worst years of hunger and misery they shared the little they had with the refugees, and if thousands of us found ourselves in the Soviet gulags and many died, that was a product of the mad dog Stalin who destroyed the best of his own people as well.

Such ambiguities also shaped major fault lines of the emerging historiography about the Soviet Union written in the English-speaking world. The later adviser to Ronald Reagan and eminent Cold Warrior Richard Pipes escaped the twin invasions of his country by going to the United States in 1939. This former Polish “nonobservant Orthodox Jew” made it his life’s work to equate Stalinism and Nazism as equally totalitarian “evil empires.” His particular trajectory of departure had not given him first-hand experience of life in the Soviet Union, however. Who knows whether, had he chosen to go east instead of west in 1939, he might have ended up with a different perspective, perhaps closer to that of another prominent historian of the Soviet Union. Moshe Lewin, who eventually also arrived in the United States, did so only after fleeing east into the Soviet Union.
INTRODUCTION: SHELTER FROM THE HOLOCAUST

in 1941, living among the Soviet people and serving in the Soviet army during the war, before departing via Poland and proceeding on to France, Israel, and England, before moving to the United States. He became influential among “revisionist” social historians opposed to the idea of totalitarianism who were bugbears to Pipes in the 1970s. Lewin’s position was partially ideological, of course: he had always been a man of the Left. But his particular stance toward the Soviet Union in general and Stalinism in particular was also born out of experience. In the final analysis, much of his scholarship was an attempt “to save the Soviet Union, which was the country that had saved him.”

If we consider the history of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union as part of the history of the Holocaust, Stalin’s state becomes the greatest (although inadvertent) rescue organization. This history is not entirely untold. Indeed, the allegation of a concerted Soviet effort to save Jews in the summer of 1941 was one of the claims the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee made on behalf of the Soviet Union, a thesis sometimes picked up and often refuted by Western scholars in the postwar years. Likewise, the experience of survival in the Soviet Union was very much present after the war, when reports by American Jewish journalists, memoirs of survivors themselves, and a significant, especially Yiddish-language, cultural production reflected this history. So what this volume does in one way is to pick up, develop, and reinvigorate an older discourse about the Soviet Union, the Holocaust, and the Second World War, which fell silent shortly after the war.

By and large, however, an overarching and often undifferentiated story of the Holocaust, its victims and survivors, has effaced the highly ambiguous role of the Soviet Union as the site where—with critical, if limited, support from American Jewish aid organizations—the great majority of the tiny postwar remnant of Polish Jewry had survived the war. Given such a “remapped” history, arguments about definitions of “survivors,” generally considered in terms of differences among prewar refugees and survivors of Nazi occupation, become even more vexed. In fact, as Atina Grossmann notes, if we exclude the “Asiatics,” the number of actual survivors (and their descendants) becomes dramatically smaller, with hard to imagine consequences for our by–now well-established rituals of commemoration, which, if anything, are expanding rather than narrowing the range of those included. Today “survivors” are counted
and identified collectively, but we do not know the story of their wartime experience, nor have they been recognized as such when they apply as individuals for reparations. Indeed, anxiety about explicitly disaggregating that collective persists today, certainly, but not only in Germany. As the generation with any living memory of the Holocaust inexorably disappears, those committed to preserving memory fear that postwar German (and Allied) accusations positioning most Jewish DPs as refugees from Communism and not “genuine” victims of Nazism might be reactivated. If the majority of survivors had in fact experienced the more “normal” horrors of wartime rather than the particular catastrophe of genocide, then, this scenario suggests, German guilt is relativized and the unique nature of Jewish persecution during World War II obscured. At the same time, however, a precisely opposite conclusion might emerge: that understanding how very few “direct” survivors there really were and that much of the “saved remnant” had survived only because it had escaped Nazi control only underscores the deadly sweep of the “Final Solution.”

Why has this complex history been lost? For one, survival in the Soviet Union was the default story of those who lived to see the postwar years and hence perhaps less interesting than the exceptional experiences of those who survived on German-occupied territory. The shock of the confrontation with the almost total devastation caused by the Final Solution engendered the sense that the Soviet story, as painful as it might have been, was not worth telling. The need to build a unified (and increasingly Zionist) Jewish community among the “remnant” pushed in the same direction, and the emerging Cold War added another reason not to talk about the contribution of the Soviet Union. Finally, the sheer ambiguity of this experience and the difficulty of narrating this highly confusing trajectory also added obstacles to representing this history in commemorative culture, both immediately after the war and as part of the “memory boom” that emerged in the 1980s. As Eliyana R. Adler’s article in this volume shows, interviewers of Holocaust survivors were often dismissive of those who tried to tell their story of survival in the Soviet Union. Therefore, the actual wartime experience of so many survivors is not adequately represented today in museums, film, and commemorative ritual. Even the transmission of this memory to the second
and third generations is affected, now that we are reaching the end of living memory.\(^{39}\)

Picking up the story of survival in the Soviet Union is a challenge to Holocaust studies, which by and large do not integrate this experience. One impact is on the question of who counts as a survivor, which also has implications for the transmission of memory to the second and third generations. It casts in a new light the role of the Soviet Union in Jewish history, at the same time underscoring the tragedy of how few Eastern European Jews were indeed able to survive this genocide. It fundamentally raises the question of the border between Holocaust studies and histories of the war in general. It may also illuminate the debates currently so active on how to talk about Holocaust studies in relation to comparative genocide studies, simultaneously highlighting the singularity of the Final Solution while also possibly “normalizing” and opening to comparison the experience of many survivors of forced migration and wartime deprivation.

The history of the survival of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union is similarly subversive when integrated into the history of Poland and of the Polish diaspora. Since the fall of Communism more than a quarter century ago, the narratives of historians at home and abroad have converged to recount the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939 as the latest chapter in a centuries-old conflict between Poland and its eastern neighbor over territory and the very right to existence of an independent Polish state—a conflict in which Poland has died many deaths and always been reborn.\(^{40}\) The deportations in particular have assumed almost legendary status, symbolic of Soviet persecution and Polish suffering, but also a prelude to Polish heroism.\(^{41}\) Once the history of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union is integrated into this narrative, it challenges what Polish historiography has portrayed as a uniquely Polish story and reveals a common experience with Jews as the connecting link.\(^{42}\)

The effects of this move could be far-reaching. Currently, no ethnic Pole would be likely to tell a story of Soviet survival like the following: “When Mir was occupied by the Russians he ran away to Wilno [Vilna] which was Lithuanian then and lived in our house with his family. The Russians caught up with him and he alone was deported in June of 1941. Our family had escaped the Russian deportation. Unfortunately so did
the uncle’s family—they did not survive the Nazi occupation whereas my uncle came back from Siberia after the war.”

But, indeed, why should there not be similar stories involving non-Jewish Poles? The Polish Jewish experience in the Soviet Union—flight, deportation, arrest, and rescue—might well complicate even the history of ethnic Poles. After all, not all those who fled to Soviet-held territory in 1941 were Jews. While the level of mortal threat was different between the two communities, why not assume that for some ethnic Poles, too, flight or even deportation to the Soviet Union might have been lifesaving? How many of the Poles in prisons, labor camps, and special settlements in the Soviet interior would have survived the ethnic cleansing carried out by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in 1943 in Volhynia and eastern Galicia, for example? And how many of them might have been killed as a direct result of German occupation policies? Clearly, even where ethnic Poles are concerned, the history of Soviet occupation and—later—liberation can be told in more than one way.

A NOTE ON STATISTICS

The numbers involved in this history are contentious. There are competing statistics, of different dates and provenances. Some were collected by the Polish exile government during the war, others by the Soviet authorities, and still others by Jewish organizations or repatriation agencies in Poland after the war. Scholars, including those contributing to this volume, do not always agree on which numbers to trust. Sometimes historians cite old numbers from earlier publications, not realizing that more reliable numbers have since emerged from the archives. In this volume, contributors have been guided by the numerical ranges presented, after exhaustive comparative evaluation of the sources, in the six tables appended to Edele and Warlik’s contribution. But they have been free to offer alternatives with an explanation of why they prefer them and, in a few cases, have done so. Indeed, even the best available numbers can provide no more than an orientation, given—as Adler points out in her chapter—the constant back-and-forth of many of the groups involved. Nevertheless, a basic overview is necessary.

Prewar Poland had a Jewish population of approximately 3 million, the Baltic states about 255,000, and Romania 756,000. In 1939–40, as a
result of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, the Soviet Union occupied and annexed the whole of the Baltic states, eastern Poland, and part of Romanian Bessarabia, adding about 2 million Jews to the Soviet population. These included 1.3 million Polish Jews from the former eastern Poland, and adding refugees from the German-held territories of Poland brings this number to between 1.4 and 1.6 million.

Of the formerly Polish Jews, some 68,000–71,000 were deported before 22 June 1941 and another 23,600 arrested; perhaps 10,000–21,000 were drafted into the Red Army. To these altogether 101,600–115,600 who had been coercively removed from the path of the Wehrmacht, we need to add 40,000–53,000 who volunteered to work in the Soviet hinterland before the Nazi storm broke over Soviet lands. At a minimum, then, 141,600 and maybe as many as 168,600 were thus saved from the German Einsatzgruppen. In addition, perhaps 210,000 Jews evacuated or fled east once the Germans attacked. These figures mean that, at the very least, 146,100 and as many as 384,600 were saved from the Holocaust by the often harsh haven of the Soviet Union. This range is consistent with the figure of 200,000–230,000 used by many recent historians. As Edele and Warlik show in their analysis of these numbers, the lower of the two series is clearly too low.

OVERVIEW OF THE VOLUME

This volume focuses on one particularly large group of Holocaust survivors: formerly Polish Jews. John Goldlust’s chapter 1 gives a general overview of their history and the process of postwar forgetting and focuses on those who ended up in Australia. Building on this sketch, Edele and Warlik, in chapter 2, map the basic wartime trajectories of Polish Jews in the Soviet Union. One group traveled, equipped with Japanese exit visas, across the entire Soviet Union to Vladivostok and on to Japan. If they did not immediately emigrate elsewhere, they usually ended up in Shanghai for the rest of the war. A second group either was deported or traveled voluntarily to the Soviet hinterland and exited the Soviet Union with the Anders army via Iran in 1942. A third group later joined the nominally Polish Berling army and returned with it to Poland at war’s end. A fourth group left only after the war during “repatriation” to Poland, and a fifth group remained in the Soviet Union for good. The chapter also uses declassified
Soviet and Polish archival materials to give estimates for the relative sizes of these various groups.

In chapter 3, Sheila Fitzpatrick considers the effects that the wartime displacement of Jews to the Soviet Union had on Soviet society at large. Under the secret treaties of the Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939, the Soviet Union acquired territories on its western borders with a population of 23 million, 2 million of whom were Jews. The Jewish population of former eastern Poland included refugees from the west, now occupied by Germany. When the Germans attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, many Jews were evacuated or fled on their own to the east, into the Soviet hinterland. Thus, largely unwittingly, the Soviet Union provided a haven that enabled hundreds of thousands of European Jews to survive the Holocaust. But there were other consequences. In the first place, the sudden arrival in the Russian hinterland of large numbers of Jews, many of them penniless and non-Russian-speaking, was quickly followed by a rise of popular antisemitism. In the second place, the concern for the plight of the Polish Jews on the part of Soviet Jewish public figures, such as the theater director Solomon Mikhoels and the Yiddish poet Perets Markish, was a major factor in the creation a few years later of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, a remarkable body, quite anomalous in Soviet terms, that for some years, until its postwar liquidation, acted as a forceful and influential lobbyist for Jewish interests in the highest councils of the Soviet government and party, as well as being a very effective international fund-raiser for the Soviet war effort.

Turning to more positive interactions, Natalie Belsky focuses in chapter 4 on encounters and interactions between Soviet Jews and Polish Jews on the Soviet home front. The chapter considers the bonds and tensions that existed between the distinct contingents of the Jewish displaced population across the Volga and Ural regions and Central Asia. Belsky demonstrates that while a shared Jewish background helped forge networks of mutual support, these encounters also demonstrated the distinct political and cultural mentalities and attitudes that had evolved over the interwar period.

In chapter 5, Atina Grossmann focuses on what happened to Polish Jews in Central Asia and once they had left the Soviet Union during the war. Iran became a central site for Jewish relief efforts as well as a crucial
transit stop for the Polish army-in-exile and the “Teheran Children” on their way to Palestine. Jewish refugees, both allied and “enemy alien,” were also a significant presence in British India, in internment camps, orphanages, and the Jewish Relief Association of Bombay. The chapter integrates these largely unexamined experiences and lost memories of displacement and trauma into our understanding of the Shoah. Seeking to remap the landscape of persecution, survival, relief, and rescue during and after World War II, Grossmann asks how this “Asiatic” experience shaped definitions (and self-definitions) as “survivors,” in the immediate postwar context of repatriation to Poland and further flight to DP camps in Allied-occupied Europe. She suggests also that such memories, including a very recent “boomlet” of narratives (electronic and hard-copy publications, republications, and translations into English) about “surviving the Holocaust” in or via the Soviet Union, might well be important to consider in the present complicated—and sometimes competing—context of the globalization of Holocaust and postcolonial memory.

Seeking to complement historical and documentary sources with personal memoirs and testimonies, Goldlust’s chapter 6 is part of a larger attempt at exploring written and oral accounts illustrative of the various pathways taken by Jews born in Poland who spent the war years under Soviet authority. Over the course of the war and through the following postwar decade, most were subject to a series of geographical relocations. As well as having to readjust to new places, people, and surroundings, they were also constantly required to negotiate a shifting, often bewildering, and frequently contradictory mélange of structural and political forces that not only impinged on their family loyalties, communal connections, and personal liberties but also, in some instances, challenged the very core of their personal understandings, beliefs, and values. Goldlust suggests that, taken together, such potentially destabilizing encounters required this disparate group of serially displaced Jews to continually readjust and reevaluate their subjective attachments to both previous and more recently “acquired” social, religious, political, and ethno-national identities.

Chapter 7 shows how such identity ascriptions can lead to the silencing of the history we are exploring in this volume. Adler explores the varied ways that Polish Jewish survivors of the Second World War in the Soviet Union talk about their experiences and identity regarding the
Holocaust in their oral testimonies. The chapter argues that by choosing, on a given day, to flee from Nazi occupation to the Soviet zone, they not only evaded the Holocaust, but they have since evaded clear classification. With a focus on interviews conducted by the Visual History Archives of the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, the chapter examines how some of the flight survivors struggle to articulate their status as survivors, while others are confident either that they did survive the Holocaust or that they did not. This exploration of the borders of Holocaust testimony sheds new light on a less prominent, yet widespread, survival experience while also problematizing both Holocaust testimony and the borders of survival.

In the epilogue, Maria Tumarkin reflects on the themes of this volume from the perspective of family history. A literary monologue, it serves as the conclusion to the book. It is an attempt to piece together an evocative and historically precise portrait of the author’s family’s experiences in Uzbekistan during World War II. Tumarkin’s grandmother and great-aunt were evacuated to Uzbekistan from Ukraine shortly after the Soviet Union was invaded by Germany in the summer of 1941. They spent nearly two years at Station Malyutinskaya in the Samarkand region—her great-aunt worked as a doctor, and her grandmother took care of, at first, two, then three, children. Her mother was that third child, born in Uzbekistan: her great-aunt’s first real-life delivery. The family was close to death from starvation and disease (typhus, malaria) many times. They survived. Tumarkin feels compelled to tell their story. Why? So much of the best historical work is about meaningful, judicious compression of fact, memory, and experience. This necessary compression, she believes, needs to be balanced with its seeming opposite—the slow telling-unraveling of a singular story.

The contributions in this volume present much new information and analysis. They amount to a first exploration of a developing field. Indeed, the extent to which this research is still a moving target is reflected by the disagreements between authors concerning not only interpretation but also some of the facts involved. Most notably, we have not always found consensus regarding the often murky statistics. The wide-ranging geography and the diversity of the affected groups make telling one, single story difficult. Nonetheless, we hope that this volume has presented a first overview, opening the way to more research. Such a history would be
INTRODUCTION: SHELTER FROM THE HOLOCAUST

relevant perhaps also to contextualizing historical and contemporary geopolitical crises concerning refugees and migration.

Notes


2. The permanent exhibit of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) lacks any display referencing the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, its official definition is extremely broad: “Survivors and Victims” are “any persons, Jewish or non-Jewish, who were displaced, persecuted, or discriminated against due to the racial, religious, ethnic, social, and political policies of the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945.” See “Survivors and Victims,” USHMM, https://www.ushmm.org/remember/the-holocaust-survivors-and-victims-resource-center/survivors-and-victims (accessed on November 22, 2016). Yad Vashem’s current definition acknowledges that “no historical definition can be completely satisfactory” and includes “Jews who lived for any amount of time under Nazi domination, direct or indirect, and survived.” It has now added to an evolving interpretation, that “from a larger perspective other destitute Jewish refugees who escaped their countries fleeing the invading German army, including those who spent years . . . deep in the Soviet Union, may also be considered Holocaust survivors,” a statement that has potential financial implications for Jews who survived in the Soviet Union and are now seeking eligibility for reparations. See “Digital Collections: FAQs,” Yad Vashem, http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/resources/names/faq.asp (accessed November 22, 2016). The Soviet aspect is highlighted in the old exhibit at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw; it is less prominent in the story presented at POLIN, the new Museum of the History of Polish Jews, and was addressed in an

The stories are there—in memoirs, in some USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education and other oral history interviews, in documentary films (such as *Saved by Deportation: An Unknown Odyssey of Polish Jews*, directed by Slawomir Grunberg [United States, 2007]), in reminiscences and diaries now being compiled and translated from (mostly) Yiddish or Polish by the second and third generations, as well as in social media and other reports about “memory tourism” by former Jewish refugees; they are also in the only recently available voluminous and difficult-to-navigate records of DP files stored in the International Tracing Service (ITS) records in Bad Arolsen, Germany, and apparently in still inaccessible NKVD archives.

3. For the term *Asiatics*, see, for example, Yehuda Bauer, *Flight and Rescue: Brichah* (New York: Random House, 1970), 26ff. Bauer refers to youth movement activists (especially the socialist Hashomer Hatzair) who returned to liberated Poland and quickly took on a leadership role in (re)organizing Zionist groups as well as establishing clandestine routes to Palestine and the U.S. zones of occupied Germany and Austria.


7. David Engel, *In the Shadow of Auschwitz: The Polish Government-in-Exile and the Jews, 1939–1942* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 61. Engel states unequivocally, “The Jews in the regions east of the Ribbentrop-Molotov line did indeed, by and large, greet the invading Soviet forces not as conquerors, but as liberators.” Other scholars, for example, Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole, and Kai Struve, have stressed that there was no “monolithic Jewish attitude” and that attitudes toward the Soviets within the Jewish communities were “sharply divided.” Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole, and Kai Struve, eds., *Shared History—Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939–1941*, Leipziger Beiträge zur Jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur, no. 5 (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), 39. Moreover, it is important to note that the deportees from former eastern Poland constituted only a small proportion—tens of thousands at the most—of the over 1 million Jewish residents of the region.


12. Quoted in Devora Omer, *The Teheran Operation: The Rescue of Jewish Children from the Nazis; Based on the Biographical Sketches of David and Rachel Laor*, trans. Riva Rubin, from the Hebrew *Hatahana Teheran* (Washington, DC: B’nai B’rith Books, 1991), 59. The translation’s title speaks directly to the paradoxes of this history because, strictly speaking, the children were rescued from terrible conditions in Soviet Central Asia and not from the Nazis.


finding that mainly women and children populated the special camps because men had been more likely to be arrested, drafted, or able to evade deportation is not reflected in Jewish memoirs. Further research on gender is clearly necessary.

15. Recollection of David Lautenberg (Laor) in Omer, Teheran Operation, 68.

16. In one of many similar stories, Norbert Adler, a Berlin-born Polish Jew, recalls that in a camp somewhere in “Siberia,” a NKVD officer named Aschheim secretly recited the Jewish prayer Sh’má to identify himself and saw to it that Adler, then a teenager, had access to jobs that provided some extra bread for his family or for barter. USC Shoah Foundation interview, 24 September 1997, accessed at USHMM, Washington, DC, 24 January 2012. Diary entries, written in Yiddish, by Lena Jedwab Rozenberg poignantly document sincere patriotic and socialist zeal and the effort to provide better food (as well as the impact of antisemitism and sexual harassment) in a children’s home in the autonomous republic of Udmurtia. Lena Jedwab Rozenberg, Girl with Two Landscapes: The Wartime Diary of Lena Jedwab, 1941–1945, trans. Solon Beinfeld, with a foreword by Irena Klepfisz and an introduction by Jan T. Gross (New York: Holmes and Meier, 2002).


18. Much more research on this aspect is necessary. For now, see Jollick, Exile and Identity, which focuses on non-Jewish Polish women. See also Natalie Belsky, “Encounters in the East: Evacuees in the Soviet Hinterland during the Second World War” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014); and Adler, “Hrubieszów at the Crossroads.”


INTRODUCTION: SHELTER FROM THE HOLOCAUST


28. Levin, Lesser of Two Evils.


30. For criticism from a Russian domestic perspective, see Mark Edele, “Fighting Russia’s History Wars: Vladimir Putin and the Codification
of World War II,” History and Memory 29, no. 2 (September 2017). For an actual comparison between Nazism and Stalinism (rather than their equation), see Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

31. For a particularly tendentious example, see the “documentary” The Soviet Story, directed by Edvins Snore (Latvia, 2008). A more nuanced approach is Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin (London: Bodley Head, 2010).


37. Jockusch and Lewinsky, “Paradise Lost?” Much of the early memoir material was written or spoken in Yiddish, including one from Moshe Grossman, an already well-known prewar Yiddish writer of novels and short stories from Warsaw who fled into eastern Poland in 1939. Moshe Grossman, In the Enchanted Land: My Seven Years in Soviet Russia (Tel Aviv: Rachel, 1960). This extensive memoir of the years Grossman spent under Soviet rule—titled with obvious irony—was first published in Yiddish in 1949. On Yiddish-language literature, see also Nesselrodt, “‘I Bled like You.’”

38. On the Joint Distribution Committee’s (JDC) determined efforts, see JDC Archives, Records of the New York Office of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1933–1944; see also Georgette Bennett and Leonard Polonsky Digitized JDC Text Archives, Item
Between 1942 and 1946, the JDC spent some $5,500,000 (equivalent to approximately $75,000,000 in 2017) on aid to refugees in the Soviet Union. See Atina Grossmann, “JOINTFUND:Teheran: The Jewish Lifeline to Central Asia,” in The Joint Distribution Committee: 100 Years of Jewish History, ed. Avinoam Patt, Linda Levi, Maud Mandel, and Atina Grossmann (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018 [forthcoming]).

42. For an attempt at such a history, see Wanda Warlik, “Polish Refugees from the Soviet Union during and after the Second World War: Iran, Africa, and Australia,” PhD diss. in progress, University of Western Australia.
45. Bernhard Chiari, Alltag hinter der Front: Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrußland 1941–1944 (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1998);


49. See chapter 2, by Edele and Warlik, table 1.

50. Ibid., tables 2–3.
