



Stalin's World War II Evacuations: Triumph and Troubles in Kirov

by Larry E. Holmes.

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Review by Teddy J. Uldricks, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (teddy.uldicks@unlv.edu).

Adolf Hitler's attack on the USSR precipitated a human tidal wave. Masses of refugees spontaneously fled from the advancing Nazi legions, while the state evacuated still more citizens from cities in the path of the German onslaught. The total number of refugees was between 16 and 25 million. The story of massive Soviet evacuations of factories and their workers, government departments, and educational institutions during the Second World War is widely, but superficially, known. Some 2,500 industrial enterprises, about 10 percent of the Soviet Union's prewar manufacturing capacity, were relocated to the Urals, the Volga region, western Siberia, and Kazakhstan. Ten million workers, engineers, and managers were sent eastward. "The results of the industrial evacuation were of critical importance for success of the Soviet war effort. It supplied the Red Army with the essential means of survival in the winter of 1941, without which nothing could have been done."¹ That said, the emergency movement of so many resources and people and the absolute priority given to the armaments industry severely disrupted the Soviet Union's economy and citizens' lives.² Both Soviet and western historians have told this story in triumphalist narratives of self-sacrificing patriots doing their utmost for the national war effort.

Drawing skillfully on pertinent archival materials, prolific historian Larry E. Holmes³ (Univ. of South Alabama) now probes beneath this superficial picture to reveal the lived experience of Soviet citizens in one particular area—the city of Kirov (pop. 150,000) and environs—five hundred miles northeast of Moscow. He has also interviewed individuals who were children living in Kirov during the evacuation. He shows that,

After initially welcoming these newcomers in their midst, Kirov's own soon resented the hardships that the central government and evacuation required of them. They became ever more vocal as realization grew that the war would be a prolonged one and when, from their perspective, evacuees inappropriately demanded privileged treatment. As Kirov and Moscow pursued their respective agendas for evacuation, sometimes in concert but increasingly at cross-purposes, they exposed preexisting and highly dysfunctional dimensions of Soviet governance at the center and at the periphery. (1)

1. John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941-1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (NY: Longman, 1991) 131.

2. See Mark Harrison, "The Soviet Union," in J. Noakes, ed., *The Civilian in War: The Home Front in Europe, Japan and the USA in World War II* (Exeter: U Exeter Pr, 1992) 74-75.

3. His previous work includes *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse: Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1931* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 1991), *Stalin's School: Moscow's Model School No 25, 1931-1937* (Pittsburgh: U Pitt Pr, 1999), *How Ordinary Russians Experience Their Lives and World: A Report of a Participant-Observer* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellon Pr, 2008), *Grand Theater: Regional Governance in Stalin's Russia, 1931-1941* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), and *War, Evacuation, and the Exercise of Power: The Center, Periphery, and Kirov's Pedagogical Institute, 1941-1952* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

Everywhere, the tsunami of evacuees and refugees badly overtaxed local resources—office and plant space, housing, public utilities, fuel, food, and consumer goods generally. Government officials hastily drew up plans for an orderly transfer of people and payment of expenses for evacuees, including for their food and shelter. But those plans ignored the fact that the USSR had been an economy of scarcity *before* the German invasion forced a drastic shift of priorities to the defense effort. Nor did they anticipate the confusion the Wehrmacht's rapid progress would cause. By late 1941, almost 250,000 evacuees, mostly women and children, had moved to the Kirov region, comprising 10 percent of the area's population (47). Besides tank and Katiusha rocket factories, orphanages, schools, performing arts facilities, museums, and government bureaus relocated to Kirov. The area also received wounded soldiers and prisoners. The result was a horror show: "People and machinery got lost in the shuffle; entire convoys temporarily disappeared. Death accompanied the living; sickness stalked the healthy. Neither railroad stations nor evacuation centers provided basic necessities. Equipment and humans spent days on end unprotected under the open sky" (57).

The influx of refugees to Kirov caused problems for and stirred the resentment of long-time residents. Their schools, for instance, were repurposed, leaving teachers and students to scramble for less suitable facilities in offices, clubs, and theaters. Moscow's Kaganovich Engineering Institute took over the facilities of the Kirov Leather and Shoe College, which had to move to a distant town. The relocation of the commissariats of Education and of Forest Industry to Kirov forced authorities to disperse local institutions elsewhere or simply disband them. Evacuees demanded and sometimes received privileged access to scarce resources. For example, Spanish Orphanage No. 10, an institution set up for the children of republican fighters in the Spanish Civil War and enjoying the patronage of high-ranking national and regional party officials, received allocations of food, clothing, and bedding that far exceeded those of local institutions or other refugee orphanages. Small wonder that their initially welcoming hosts came to resent these uninvited guests, feeling they "had cowardly fled the enemy, demanded far too many privileges paid for out of the local budget, refused to support themselves by working, and adopted a condescending attitude toward the people around them" (88).

The people of Kirov and their Regional Soviet responded by providing the evacuees too little space and too few resources. Nonessential personnel were sent to remote collective farms, as local authorities fought (sometimes successfully) to evict their unwelcome guests. By the end of 1942, 42 percent of the evacuees had left the city. Though the Red Army's offensive in winter 1941–42 relieved the threat to Moscow and allowed some government departments and factories to move back to the capital, "one government agency after another, from Kirov to Moscow and back, demanded the impossible from each and all" (142).

Although local residents believed evacuees to be unfairly privileged by the state, most refugees in fact faced harsh realities. They left behind their homes, most of their possessions, and often family and friends on very short notice to make difficult journeys to their distant new homes. Once there, they labored to set up new plants and offices, generally without any mechanical assistance. Their new locales seldom had adequate facilities for them. As late as 1943, some of them were still living in cold, cramped, dirty, louse-infested dugouts. "On average, a worker and each family member had about 2 square meters to call home" (74). Many workers walked five to ten kilometers to work, even in subfreezing temperatures. Twelve-hour shifts (or longer) were typical and cafeteria fare was meager and unappetizing. Overwork, malnutrition, and disease shrank production and sent workers to hospitals. Death from exposure or starvation was common. Chil-

dren in orphanages and patients in military hospitals fared even worse, because those institutions were desperately short of food, medical supplies, and equipment.

Soviet authorities had not planned properly for mass wartime evacuations, assuming that any attack on their borders would be repelled quickly and decisively. When that proved untrue, Moscow made sweeping decisions about the fate of people and institutions with little knowledge of local conditions. Regional officials were sometimes cooperative, but more often resisted impositions on their turf. Moscow frequently made matters worse or created new problems while solving others.

The author's tale, while far from triumphalist, is one of heroic achievement. For all the privations and complaints, "most evacuated children survived. The vast majority of the ill and wounded soldiers in military hospitals recovered, many to return to active duty. Evacuated defense plants ... soon commenced production. These successes were won through great sacrifice by evacuees and local citizens" (87). *Stalin's World War II Evacuations* is a valuable addition to recent scholarship on Soviet evacuations and migrations.⁴ Specialists and general readers alike will find Larry Holmes's perceptive new book both highly informative and heartbreaking.

4. See, e.g., Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2009); Paul Stronski, *Tashkent: Forging A Soviet City, 1930–1966* (Pittsburgh: U Pitt Pr, 2010); and Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Leslie Page Moch, *Broad Is My Native Land: Repertoires and Regimes of Migration in Russia's Twentieth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2014).