

Stalin's Bureaucracy in Action: The Creation and Destruction of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee

Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented Study of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR*, Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995.

Reviewed by
Theodore H. Friedgut

For two decades Shimon Redlich has been studying the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and has published both monographs and articles on various questions relating to the Committee, establishing himself undisputedly as the leading academic authority on this subject. Now, together with scholars from Yad Vashem as editorial consultants, and with the active cooperation of the directors of the main historical archives of the Russian Federation, Redlich has produced this new and enlightening volume. He analyzes the activities and relations of the JAFK leadership with various constituencies in the Soviet Union and abroad and, most importantly, with the highest echelons of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The academic analysis is reinforced in this volume by 181 archival documents that give a far more nuanced texture to the narrative than was possible until the opening of Soviet archives in the era of Gorbachev's *perestroika*.

The text and documents are supplemented by copious annotation and, in particular, by biographical material on almost every person mentioned in the book. While many of these entries are valuable for their detail, others add little or nothing to what is mentioned in the text and might well have been omitted. There are also such slips as giving Ussishkin's first name as Abraham rather than Menahem M. (p. 33, n. 34). In addition, an alphabetic index of the biographies, or an indication in the index (for instance, by bold type) as to the page number of the biography would have been of considerable help to the reader.

The value of this volume is not limited to the accurate historical detail provided by the documents. The main flow of the rise and fall of the JAFK was essentially

delineated by Redlich in his earlier volume (Shimon Redlich, *Propaganda and Nationalism in Wartime Russia: The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR, 1941-1948*, Boulder: East European Quarterly, 1982). While both the historian and the interested lay reader will derive satisfaction from knowing precisely the dates and circumstances in which the two Polish Bund leaders, Victor Alter and Henryk Erlich, died in Soviet prisons (Erlich committed suicide on May 14, 1942, in Kuibishev prison. Alter was executed in the same prison on February 17, 1943), or the exact accusations under which Polina Zhemchuzhina, the Jewish wife of Politburo member and foreign minister of the USSR, Vyacheslav M. Molotov was arrested and exiled from January 1949 until four days after Stalin's death in March 1953 (nationalist antisoviet agitation), these are marginal to the hard-core politics of the Committee's activities and fate.

The 1982 monograph, however, had as its central theme the Soviet regime's use of minority nationalities in the effort to mobilize support for its war against Nazi Germany, both within the USSR and in the international arena. Thus, the 1982 work is essentially a study of a particular facet in the workings of the Soviet political system at a time of crisis. Even though some of the chapter headings from the previous work are repeated in the present volume, the focus here is much more on the internal workings of the JAFC and the influence of its foreign and domestic activities on its standing in the eyes of the Communist Party leadership.

As part of the cooperative effort of this project, a Russian-language version of the volume has been published in Moscow (*Evreiskii antifashistskii komitet v SSSR, 1941-48, Dokumentirovannaia istoriia*, Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1996). The two volumes differ only marginally, though the system of editing is quite different. In the English-language version, the documents are grouped toward the end of the volume, while the Moscow edition places them at the end of each relevant chapter and combines the endnotes of the chapter with the endnotes of the documents. The Moscow edition lists 189 documents, giving separate numbers to several smaller items that are grouped together under a single number in the English-language version. Comparison of the Russian and English texts of the documents reveals a number of awkwardnesses and

shortcomings in the English translations. Minor differences in the narrative text appear to be a result of the need to explain to the Russian-language audience matters that are presumably more widely known to the English-language reader. Only one substantive difference in the documents was found between the two versions. The Russian-language version includes (chapter 2, part 3) an interesting letter to the JAFK from Rabbi Abraham Bick on behalf of the Committee of Ukrainian *Landsmanshaften* attached to the Jewish Committee for Assistance to Soviet Russia. The English-language version only refers to the letter, giving the reaction of the JAFK and the Communist Party authorities.

The JAFK was formed as a Soviet propaganda organ, and the strident tone of the early accusations of barbarism by the Nazis fits traditional forms of such wartime announcements (butchering of babies, raping of women, wholesale arson and pillage). But as territories were liberated by the advancing Red Army in 1942 and 1943, the shocking realities of the Holocaust became known to the committee members and transformed their consciousness and their activities. From November 1942, when the Soviet government established the “Extraordinary Commission for Investigation of Crimes Perpetrated by the German-Fascist Occupiers and Their Collaborators,” detailed authenticated information streamed into the JAFK offices. The commission ultimately collected a quarter million reports of atrocities. Eighty thousand microfilm frames from this collection, relating to crimes against Soviet Jews, are now in the Yad Vashem archive in Jerusalem. This was soon supplemented by the testimony of survivors and the anguished letters written by those returning to the ruins of their former homes. Colonel (later General) David Dragunsky wrote:

“...In my home town the German fascist monsters executed my entire family — 74 members of the Dragunsky family in all. But what especially saddened me was that no graves were arranged. The little bones of my sisters and children are scattered about the fields. Cattle trample them — in a word, all human dignity is lost” (p. 231).

Perhaps even more painful were the stories of displaced or returnee Jews who encountered acts of open antisemitism in the liberated areas. For some,

particularly, as will later be discussed, for Il'ia Ehrenburg, this was the moment that caused a transformation of consciousness from "Soviet citizen of Jewish origin" to simply a Jew. Anger against Nazi atrocities was easy. The German invader was the enemy. Dealing with the antisemitic attitudes of Soviet officials and fellow-citizens put Soviet Jews into conflict with their environment.

In addition to relating the details of the JAFC's origins and demise, this volume presents a vivid picture of its internal workings, both generally and in the specific context of such projects as the preparation of the *Black Book*. In addition, there are four highly important chapters dealing with the Committee's relations with four different constituencies: Soviet Jews; the world Jewish community (and particularly the Jews of the U.S.A.); Israel's Jewish community both before and after the establishment of the State of Israel; and last, but certainly not least, the Soviet authorities—the Foreign Ministry, the Sovinformburo (the propaganda organization attached to the Foreign Ministry, under which the JAFC worked), the various departments of the Secretariat of the Soviet Communist Party, and, ultimately, the Politburo and Josef Stalin himself.

Perhaps most informative in respect to the above was the process by which the Committee's formed relationships with the Jews of the USSR. One of the initial tasks of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was to mobilize Soviet Jews into active support of the anti-Nazi war effort. Very rapidly, however, both individuals and groups began to relate to the Committee as a center for Jewish affairs in general, as an address for Jewish complaints and suggestions, and as an intercessor with the Soviet authorities for Jewish interests—a sort of born-again Jewish Commissariat. Almost certainly the growth of this process was a weakness seized upon by the authorities as an excuse for the JAFC's dismemberment.

The development of this function is clearly illustrated in the documents. First we learn of the Jewish response to the Committee's activities and the addressing of petitions and complaints to the Committee. Then, as the war winds down, in late 1943 and early 1944, we read documents demonstrating that the JAFC had, in fact, adopted the new functions pressed on it by its petitioners. The fact that beleaguered Soviet Jews turned to the Committee as the only institution that was truly "theirs" is perhaps natural. The acceptance of this new role by the

Committee is a reflection of the character of Mikhoels, Markish, and some of the other cultural figures: naive true believers whose near-Messianic fervor to aid their brethren in their hour of need eclipsed whatever caution they had learned in the 1930s. The documents include complaints to Molotov, in his capacity as deputy chair of the Council of People's Commissars, about discrimination in the allocation of aid to displaced persons; or to Politburo member and People's Commissar for Internal Affairs Lavrentii P. Beria regarding anti-Jewish acts; lobbying with Mikhail Kalinin, chair of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, asking his intercession to obtain housing for an ill front-line veteran; or to Zhemchuzhina for a place for a paralyzed Jewish literary critic in the Kremlin hospital; and, finally, complaints regarding the unwillingness of local authorities to undertake memorialization of destroyed Jewish communities. From the most general and serious to the most particular and petty issues, the leadership of the JAFC took all of them up with alacrity, embracing new functions that might extend the Committee's life far beyond its original wartime mandate. The documents illustrate a classic case of an organization looking for new fields of activity when its original function disappears. There were doubtless some, such as Mikhoels and Shimeliovich, who were truly and deeply concerned with the desperate state in which so many Jews found themselves after the war, but the demands of the JAFC leaders to be involved directly in so many areas of decision-making and implementation of policies regarding the Jewish public appear to go far beyond simple humanitarian concern.

Not all the Committee's leaders were happy with this metamorphosis. There were warnings that the JAFC was entering into areas that were not its business. The majority, however, plunged with great energy into the new role of defender of Jewish rights and interests and Soviet-Jewish representative to the Jewish communities of the "New Democracies" of Eastern Europe (pp. 41-42). This adoption of new functions by the Committee's leadership was later exploited by the Soviet authorities as one of the bases for charges against the JAFC and for its liquidation.

Yet if the representation of Soviet Jews' interests and grievances made some of the JAFC uncomfortable, the exuberant reaction of hundreds, if not thousands of

Soviet Jews to the establishment of Israel caused true panic. As Itzik Fefer later said:

It must be said that it was more difficult for us in those days when the State of Israel was declared. We were simply attacked. Dozens of people came to us daily. We had to stay here all the time and explain to people exactly what the State of Israel was, and how it portrayed itself (doc. 164, p. 408).

Letters came in from all over the Soviet Union, from ordinary people, party members, war veterans, and such public figures as chess champion Mikhail Botvinnik and writer Il'ia Ehrenburg, who wrote that the declaration of Israel's birth had been written "not in ink, but in blood" (p. 374), evoking echoes of "The Jewish Partisan Song." For those who believe that the Jewish identity of Soviet Jews awakened only after the 1967 Six Day War, the documents published here by Shimon Redlich provide a powerful and healthy corrective. The letters ranged from praise for the Soviet recognition of the new Jewish state to suggestions for material and military assistance to Israel and declarations of readiness to volunteer for the Israel Defense Forces. By order of "higher authorities," none of these letters was published in the Committee's newspaper *Eynikait*.

The names and addresses of those writing such letters were duly forwarded to the authorities, along with summaries of the contents. This was done by Grigorii Kheifetz, who, according to Redlich, had been a Soviet intelligence agent in the 1930s, and, along with the poet Itzik Fefer, chair of the Communist Party group in the JAFK, served (whether willingly or under duress we do not know) as the eyes and ears of the Security Police in the Committee. These reports were duly handed on up to Mikhail Suslov, then head of the Central Committee's Foreign Policy Department, a powerful institution that had the ear of the leadership in all policy problems. Redlich shows a sharp sense of irony in including in the documents a debate in the JAFK Presidium about how to react to Soviet Jews' enthusiasm for Israel during which the police informer, Fefer, cautions his colleagues: "You understand that what is known to us is also known to the authorities, who are well informed about everything." In the same debate, the writer Leib Kvitko vents frustrated anger that he cannot openly write that Golda

Meyerson, Israel's first ambassador in Moscow, is "a narrow-minded woman and that only the more ignorant elements regard her with reverence" (doc. 164, p. 406).

The crisis came when a letter purporting to represent the Jews of Zhmerinka and signed by nine people was sent to *Pravda*. Claiming that 500 people had read the letter (and presumably approved its contents), the authors asked the Soviet government to allow all Jews of Zhmerinka "to go to our homeland...to create a large Jewish democratic state" (doc. 152). The presidium of the JAFC held an anguished debate as to how to handle this embarrassing breach of Soviet patriotism. It was proposed that the Committee conduct "explanatory work...in view of the fact that people simply do not understand the situation....We should not shout, we should speak between the lines, so that it becomes understood" (p. 402). Fefer sums up: "We will not enter into polemics with Zhmerinka. We should...dispel the incorrect notions among individual elements of the Jewish population" (p. 404).

An interesting facet of the Communist Party leadership's workings is revealed by the documents. A letter of May 18, 1944, from Mikhoels and Epshteyn, asking Molotov to intercede on behalf of needy Jews, was brought to the attention of Beria, Malenkov, and Khrushchev, with requests to investigate the validity of the complaints and to prepare corrective measures and take action where such was found necessary. The Soviet leadership was not blindly closed to the plight of the Jews in the newly-liberated areas. A second letter to Molotov in October, however, evoked a bureaucratic response from the Commissariat of People's Control "proving" that the Jews were a privileged minority in the distribution of relief (documents 46, 53).

Not all the politics were played out in Communist Party institutions. The chapter on the development and fate of the *Black Book* reveals factionalism and personal animosities, as well as deep differences in political approaches of various personalities within the JAFC. The book, first suggested by Albert Einstein, Scholem Asch, and Ben Tzion Goldberg toward the end of 1942, underwent numerous changes en route to its dismal fate. First suggested as a volume exposing Nazi crimes against Jews all over Europe (a project that was quickly completed and published in America with the inclusion of material on

Soviet Jews sent by the Committee), it later was suggested at JAFRC initiative as a book dealing only with the Holocaust on Soviet territory. Ostensibly, the main disagreement in the editorial committee was as to whether the book should be a purely documentary record, or should also include literary re-workings of factual material. Yet a reading of the materials provided by Redlich in this volume shows two other points that appear to have weighed more heavily in the ultimate decisions regarding the book.

The first point provided here was the dispute as to the emphasis to be placed on Jews as Jews. Vassilii Grossman, a member of the editorial committee, proposed minimizing the use of the word “Jew,” replacing it with people. Ehrenburg objected strongly, declaring:

“The point is that when a person describes what happened—that all the Jews were forced to wear an arm band, that they were taken to the market or the ghetto, he cannot do this without saying the word “Jew.” Another thing: if a person is describing Odessa, he will not use the word “Jew” all the time, he will write it in different ways. But in a document which describes these instances, the repetition of the word “Jew” four or five times is unavoidable. If you say that “people” were driven into the ghetto, it does not ring true (doc. 124, p. 353)”.

Ehrenburg emerges as a personality virtually transformed by the historical uniqueness of the Jewish experience in the Holocaust. While this transformation was hidden from the broad public until recent years, the discussion and documents provided by Professor Redlich show that this metamorphosis occurred early on in the war. If Ehrenburg's articles in the general press were notable for their fierce hate of what the Nazis were doing to the Soviet population as a whole, his appearances in the discussions of the JAFRC and the *Black Book* editorial commission show a pride in his Jewishness and a burning desire to expose antisemitism, not only of the Nazis but of portions of the Soviet population as well. Ultimately, following Ehrenburg's resignation from the editorial board of the *Black Book*, when he found that he was not being consulted on some major decisions of content, a watchdog editorial board was formed to guarantee the ideological purity of the publication, including the excision of any references to anti-Jewish acts by any part of the Soviet

population. Here was the birth of the Soviet version that those murdered at Babi Yar and a hundred other sites were simply “Soviet citizens, victims of Fascism.”

But the Jewish political in-fighting did not stop there. Indeed, Ehrenburg is cited by Epshteyn in a pejorative spirit as having said at a JAFC discussion soon after the end of the war that the main task of the Committee was to combat antisemitism within the Soviet Union (doc. 167, p. 414). The citation was duly forwarded to the head of the Foreign Policy Department of the Central Committee Secretariat, Mikhail Suslov, as an example of the manner in which the Committee was falling into political error and “Showed itself to be a prisoner of bourgeois Zionist ideology which is characteristic of all Jews abroad.”

Suslov, later to become the ideologist and gray eminence of the Politburo, duly incorporated these charges into a report submitted, in November 1946, to the entire top leadership of the Soviet Communist Party, including Stalin. The conclusion of Suslov's report was that his department considered the continued existence of the JAFC “inappropriate and politically harmful” and presented the leadership with a draft “proposal for its liquidation” (doc. 170, p. 433). Of all the officials whose reports are quoted in the documents, Suslov emerges as the most dourly adamant against any significant role for the JAFC in the post war Soviet Union. Time and again he reports that “it is not advisable” for the Committee to participate in proposed activities—international conferences, exchanges of delegations, or even visits to Jewish Communist Committees in the countries of Eastern Europe.

Suslov was apparently even then too powerful a figure to be disputed, but this was not the case with M. Shcherbakov, director of the Central Committee's Personnel Department (not to be confused with A.S. Shcherbakov, once head of the Main Political Administration of the Red Army, and later deputy minister of Defense, whose death in 1945 was ascribed to deliberate medical mistreatment in “the Doctors' Plot” of 1953). Shcherbakov sent a devastating critique of Yiddish literature and journalism, accusing them of being tainted by “nationalistic and mystical-religious tendencies” as well as entertaining erroneous political positions on the question of Palestine and “the incomprehensible prejudice against Soviet Birobidzhan, the use of the name of Maxim Gorky to justify an alien ideology, and much more.” His report concluded with a recommendation

that the Secretariat of the Central Committee hold a discussion on the position of Yiddish literature in the Soviet Union (doc. 168). Andrei Zhdanov, the Communist Party's chief authority on culture at the time, requested comments on the report from Georgii Aleksandrov, director of the Propaganda Department. Aleksandrov replied that "several assertions reported in Comrade Shcherbakov's letter were checked and turned out to be unsubstantiated" (doc. 164, p. 424). Others are simply labeled as "not corresponding to reality" or "incorrect." One by one Shcherbakov's accusations are refuted in detail, and Aleksandrov's reply ends with the finding that any examination of the question of Yiddish literature at the present time should be considered inadvisable. Aleksandrov's stand is all the more remarkable since it comes at a time when Suslov had already suggested the "liquidation" of the JAFK, many of whose activists were the same writers attacked by Shcherbakov.

The demise of the JAFK was clearly foreshadowed by the end of 1946, and Redlich writes that the first trial of its activists was originally scheduled for 1950. There was, however, a temporary reprieve because a number of those investigated refused to confess, including Dr. Shimeliovich and Polina Zhemchuzhina, while Peretz Markish, Professor Lena Shtern, and others, retracted confessions made earlier. In addition, Stalin supposedly had fatter lambs to slaughter—the "Leningrad Affair," in which Malenkov busied himself destroying the local power base of his late rival, Zhdanov; a purge of the Ministry of State Security, including Minister V. S. Abakumov, Stalin's erstwhile faithful servitor; and possibly a number of other cases.

But the reprieve was brief. Despite all that has been published on the evil of Stalin's regime, the reader stands dumbfounded at the description of Stalin ordering his new Minister of State Security M. D. Ryumin to produce evidence of specific acts of espionage by the JAFK leadership. Ryumin, who had attained his position by denouncing his predecessor, complied happily and, by the spring of 1952, handed Stalin forty-two volumes of "evidence" to be reviewed and approved by the Politburo. Throughout the trial Fefer not only admitted his guilt, but acted as a witness for the prosecution. The others accused either wholly or partially, denied their guilt, and Shimeliovich, Shtern, and the Old Bolshevik functionary Lozovsky went on the offensive, denouncing both the trial and the

interrogation, including rabidly antisemitic behavior by the investigators. But the finale had been written in advance, and the defendants' protests serve only to enhance their historical image. All but Lena Shtern had been condemned to death, with the Politburo confirming the Ministry of State Security's recommended sentence even before the trial opened. Except for the defendants' stubborn refusal to be broken, the only deviation from the prepared scenario was the request of the chair of the Military Collegium that heard the case, Lieutenant General Cheptsov, to return the case to the authorities for additional investigation because of "inadequacies of the investigation and documentation" (p. 154). His appeal, which Redlich does not know whether to attribute to honesty, legal formalism, or simple naïveté, was rejected. He, nevertheless, later turned to Malenkov, who curtly rejected his requests, and ultimately appealed for clemency to Stalin, forwarding a petition from Lozovsky. Surely these actions go beyond naïveté or formalism, etching a bright spot of honest humanism onto a scene of otherwise unrelieved corruption and hatred. The picture of how Stalin's apparatus functioned is brutally clear. Nevertheless, the text and documents raise some fundamental, if unanswerable, questions. Why execute Alter after three years of imprisonment? Why murder Mikhoels, and why stage such an elaborate cover-up? And if the execution of all the activists of the JAFK was considered necessary, why spare Lena Shtern? The arbitrary nature of Stalinist terror that emerges so clearly in this work has always been one of its most horrifying and inexplicable elements.

Thanks to Professor Redlich's painstaking persistence, we now have a vivid and complete picture of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee's internal workings and its relations with the Soviet authorities. Might it not be appropriate to suggest that he continue his work by publishing the relevant archival material of the World Jewish Congress, the American and British governments, and other public and governmental organizations that had an interest in the workings of the JAFK.

Source: *Yad Vashem Studies* Vol. XXVI, Jerusalem 1998, pp. 419-431.