"You will Sow but you will not Reap": The Flight of Jewish Peasants from Soviet Crimea, 1941

Kiril Feferman

Introduction

The article sheds light on a short, albeit important episode in the Crimean Jewish saga – the evacuation of Jews from the Crimean countryside in 1941. For a variety of reasons, hitherto it has not been tackled in scholarship as a topic in its own right. At most, it was embedded in general studies, not too numerous, dealing with the history of the Jews in the peninsula during the Second World War or the history of the Holocaust in the region.

It is beyond doubt that the subject of the article is intrinsically connected to two other "background" issues: the short-lived history of the Jewish agricultural colonization in the peninsula and in particular, the general Jewish evacuation from the Crimea. Yet, the article hypothesizes that the evacuation of Jews from the Crimean countryside differed dramatically from the "core" history of the Jewish evacuation

from Crimea precisely because it took place in the countryside. These background issues are dealt with in an introductory section. The bulk of the article is devoted to the interaction between the government evacuation policy and the Jewish inhabitants of the Crimean countryside. The article draws on a variety of primary sources kept in former Soviet archives, as well as in Yad Vashem, and secondary literature.

**Background**

By 1917, more than 68,000 Jews and Krymchaks lived in the Crimea, constituting some 8.4% of the entire population. Jewish presence in the peninsula continued uninterrupted until the outbreak of the Second World War. However, during the interwar period, it was considerably reinforced by the arrival of Jews whom the Soviet government was eager to transform into farmers (kolkhozniki). Their arrival, settlement, and the development of the Jewish kolkhozes was greatly facilitated by the generous aid provided by the JDC, acting in cooperation with the Soviet authorities and state-controlled Jewish organizations. By 1939, more than 18,000 Jews (27.6% out of the total Jewish population) lived in the rural areas of the peninsula. This was more than twice as high as the comparable figure for the entire Soviet Jewish population (13.1% as of 1939) and arguably made it the

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3 For the purposes of the study, all Jewish inhabitants of Crimean rural areas are referred to in this article as "Jewish kolkhozniki".


6 Mordechai Altshuler, *Distribution of the Jewish Population of the USSR 1939* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1993), 63.

most distinctive feature of the prewar Crimean Jewish community. For a variety of reasons, primarily foreign aid, Crimean Jewish villages were relatively prosperous by local standards.8

A considerable part of them (31.6%) dwelt in two big concentrations of the Jewish population, the so-called "Jewish National Areas" (evreiskie natsyonal'nye raiony) of Fraidorf and Larindorf.9 Jewish national areas were created in several rural areas of the Soviet Union as a part of its indigenization policy.10 Jews made up a considerable part, but not necessarily the majority of their population.

Very soon after the beginning of the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the central Soviet government launched a large-scale state evacuation program aimed primarily at removing key industries (of any relevance to the country's war effort, broadly defined) and the workers employed in them.11 These people, alongside party and state officials at various levels were ordered to evacuate. They could, or sometimes were ordered to, take their families with them. In addition, there were some other categories of population, such as children and adults with disabilities whose evacuation was sanctioned on a humanitarian basis.12

However, most Jews who succeeded in evacuating from the Crimea were those whose flight was not ordered by the authorities

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as a part of the state-run evacuation program, but who managed to take advantage of it. On the whole, the central government and local authorities did not clearly define the eligibility criteria for evacuation, which led to inconsistency in local evacuation policies. As the front line drew closer to the Crimea, the circle of those eager to leave widened. Concomitantly, it became more difficult to procure the evacuation authorizations and once in possession of the necessary documents, to realize them.

The decision-making process within a family or by an individual was influenced by a number of factors, most specifically the information available to the Jews in the Crimea about the impending disaster. The peninsula was relatively isolated, which reduced the number of those in the Crimea who knew about the German persecution of Jews. Yet, other factors were at work that acted to offset this trend. This included a high share of men drafted into the Red Army, which could enable them to learn more on the German policies towards Jews and to alert their relatives, and most importantly the fact that the peninsula had been occupied for more than four months since the beginning of the war. These factors acted to increase the number of the Crimean Jews who were aware of the German onslaught on Jews.

The official Soviet media was an important channel through which the Crimean Jews could learn, explicitly or implicitly, that they should evacuate. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that, fearful of the German propaganda, the authorities ordered the local population to hand over all radio sets at the very beginning of the war. In addition,

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14 Simferopol, interview with Vladimir Peisakh (March 22, 2004), author's archive.
because of the chaos of war, it was nearly impossible to find central newspapers in the Crimea at that time.\textsuperscript{16}

The analysis of the most important remaining official source, the daily newspaper \textit{Krasnyi Krym} (Red Crimea),\textsuperscript{17} reveals ambiguous messages that the Crimean Jews could obtain from reading this newspaper.\textsuperscript{18} First, there were quite a number of publications in \textit{Krasnyi Krym} on the German maltreatment of Jews in Europe, which highlighted the especially brutal treatment of Jews as compared to the rest of the population.\textsuperscript{19} Yet, there was only one article on Nazi persecution and the annihilation of Jews in the occupied Soviet territories, and it was published relatively late.\textsuperscript{20} Second, the gradual approach of the Wehrmacht to the Crimea was partly reflected in the newspaper, albeit with a delay.\textsuperscript{21}

At the same time, not a single word was said about the evacuation from the Crimea. On the contrary, there were plenty of articles emphasizing the "business as usual" atmosphere, such as the need to comply with tasks of the harvest collection for autumn 1941.\textsuperscript{22} As for the domestic military agenda, the propaganda message remained the same

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\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Testimony of Gopshtein, YVA: M.35/23, p. 62.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Published in Simferopol by the Crimean District Committee and Simferopol Municipal Committee of the VKP(b) and the Supreme Council of the Crimean ASSR. I looked through all available issues from June 22 to September 18, 1941.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} See for example: I. Degtyarev, "Fascism is the Bitterest Enemy of the Human Kind", \textit{Krasnyi Krym} 164 (6176), July 13, 1941, p. 2; G. D., "Hitler's 'New Order' in Europe", \textit{Krasnyi Krym} 167 (6179), July 17, 1941, p. 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Vanda Vasilevskaya, "Western Ukraine is Bleeding", \textit{Krasnyi Krym} 221 (6233), September 18, 1941, p. 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} See for example: "Kiev was and will be Soviet", Meeting of the Youth [at Simferopol], \textit{Krasnyi Krym} 207 (6219), September 2, 1941, p. 2; A. Krasnov, "At the Approaches to Kiev", \textit{Krasnyi Krym} 212 (6224), September 7, 1941, p. 2; T. Zhukov, "Defense of Odessa", \textit{Krasnyi Krym} 212 (6224), p. 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} T. Ametshaev, "The Most Important Task of the Agricultural Workers in the Crimea", \textit{Krasnyi Krym} 218 (6230), September 14, 1941, p. 3.
\end{itemize}
throughout the whole Soviet period: "The Crimea will be defended at any cost".\textsuperscript{23}

It should be also taken into account that possessing information of the German brutalities towards Jews did not automatically lead the whole family to decide to evacuate. Some Jews simply discarded it out of hand.\textsuperscript{24} For others the decision-making process was more nuanced:

1. For some mixed families such information sufficed to make Jewish husbands evacuate but they consciously left their Russian wives and children behind in the due-to-be-occupied territory.\textsuperscript{25}
2. Illness of a family member\textsuperscript{26} or the pregnancy of a wife\textsuperscript{27} could prevent the whole family from evacuating.
3. Memories of stability left by the German occupation during the First World War (the Crimea was occupied by Germany in 1918) in the considerations of some elderly Jews made them unwilling to evacuate in 1941.\textsuperscript{28}

As for the spontaneous flight from the peninsula, the following consideration should be taken into account. On the face of it, before the fighting began for the isthmus of Perekop (connecting the Crimea

\textsuperscript{23} See for example: "Let's Turn the Crimea into an Unassailable Fortress", Meeting of the Student Youth in Simferopol, \textit{Krasnyi Krym} 203 (6215), August 28, 1941, p. 3; Editorial, "Let's Transform the Crimea into an Unassailable Fortress", \textit{Krasnyi Krym} 213 (6225), September 9, 1941, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{24} Kerch, story of Iosef Vaingarten, \textit{Einikait}, July 15, 1942.
\textsuperscript{25} Diary of Chrisanf Lashkevich, entry from August(?) 1942, State Archive of the Autonomous Republic of the Crimea (DAARK): P-156/1/31, p. 87.
\textsuperscript{26} Simferopol, Yalta, memoirs of A. F. Peganova, November 9, 1944, DAARK: P-156/1/40, pp. 34–45; Statement of Khrista Zheltukhin, June 3, 1944, State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF): 7021/9/59, p. 102.
\textsuperscript{28} Simferopol, Yevpatoria, testimony of Rachel Horovitz, March 20, 1988, YVA: 0.3/4875, p. 5; Interview with Peisakh, author's archive.
with Southern Ukraine) on September 24, 1941, Jews could move out of the Crimea by land, i.e., through the Perekop isthmus. However, as the front line rapidly approached, Jews were able to avail themselves of such a possibility only in a very few cases. Thus, as a result of its unique geographic position, the evacuation from the Crimea was overwhelmingly made possible by sea routes.

Evacuation from the Crimea commenced at the very beginning of the war. Given the fact that the region was not directly endangered by the German armies in the first months of the war, one can say that in the initial phase of the warfare its dimensions were considerable. According to the data of the Central Council for Evacuation, some 51,000 people were evacuated from the peninsula by August 20, 1941. Among them there were Jews; other Jews considered this possibility, although we are unaware of whether these hesitations came to fruition. Although there is no appraisal of the share of the Jews among this wave of the evacuees, the only testimony which depicts the evacuation from the Crimea by train, indicates the huge scope of this process "All the passengers on the train were Jews".

Significant intensification in the government-sponsored evacuation

30 Yevpatoria, testimony of Rachel Gurevich (no date), Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Department of Oral History (ICJ): TC 2761 (not transcribed).
31 Report of the Deputy People's Commissar of Transportation on the course of evacuation in accordance with the decisions of SNK SSSR (secret), August 22, 1941, YVA: JM/24678.
33 Simferopol, Idem, p. 3.
34 Yevpatoria, testimony of Gurevich, ICJ: TC 2761.
may be traced to mid-August 1941 when the strategic position of the Soviet forces in Southern Ukraine deteriorated considerably. Soviet authorities considered the possibility of an imminent German thrust in the direction of the Crimea, which resulted in growing ambiguity in the Soviet plans. On the one hand, they involved important military preparations such as the erection of defensive positions around strategic locations and the organization of local armaments production. On the other hand, special attention was drawn now to the speedy removal of the population from the Crimea. On August 14, 1941, the Supreme Command Headquarters issued the Directive to the Military Council of the 51st Army, which was defending the peninsula. Accordingly: "In order to conduct the defense of the Crimea [...] everything of value but of no need for the defense is to be evacuated".

This moment may be called a turning point in the evacuation from the Crimea as it envisaged a really large-scale undertaking. Consequently, evacuation was greatly accelerated in September–October. Many Jews were able to leave the Crimea during this period. The growing scope of the evacuation from the peninsula became itself a weighty factor in the decision of Jews to evacuate, as well as the news of the Soviet surrender of important centers close to the Crimea.

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35 Kerch, decree of the Bureau of the Kerch Municipal Committee of the VKP(b) on the erection of defensive objects around the town. It was scheduled in August 11, 1941, that all the works would be over by August 26, 1941 (I. P. Kondranov and A. A. Stepnova [eds.], Krym v period Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny: Shornik dokumentov i materialov [Simferopol: Tavria, 1973], 49–50).

36 Kerch, decree of the Bureau of the Crimean District Committee of the VKP(b) on the organization of armaments production in the Crimean enterprises, August 28, 1941; Idem, pp. 54–55.


38 Simferopol, Yalta, statement of Feldman, GARF: 7021/9/95, p. 353; Statement of Iona Achkinaz, September 18, 1944, GARF: 7021/9/95, p. 67.

39 Naum Sirota, Tak derzhalas' Kerch (Simferopol: Krymizdat, 1961), 34–35.

40 Kherson and Nikolaev by mid-August 1941, Kiev on September 19, 1941, and
However, since the second half of October 1941, increasing German bombardments of ships going to and from the Crimea turned evacuation into a most dangerous enterprise. They prevented it from being accomplished in a daytime and severely diminished the efficiency of Soviet evacuation. Thousands of evacuees, among them Jews, perished during the attacks directed against all Crimean harbors.

**The evacuation of Jewish *kolkhozniki***

Given the aforementioned assumptions, it appears that on the face of it, Jewish *kolkhozniki* were not favorably positioned with respect to evacuation prospects. They lived in rural settlements where arguably critical information that could lead Jews to escape was overwhelmingly unavailable. Few refugees possessing such information, even at the level of rumors, escaped through Crimean villages, if at all. By the same token, official information available to urban dwellers, such as war reports published in newspapers, was likewise mainly unavailable to Crimean villagers. It may be anticipated that unless offset by other factors, these considerations acted to significantly decrease, if not to entirely curb, the flux of Jewish refugees from the Crimean countryside.

After the beginning of the war, central Soviet authorities demanded that "*kolkhozniki* remove the cattle and hand the bread over to the state bodies for safe keeping so that it would be removed to the rear areas".

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41 Kerch, Interview with Peisakh, Author's archive.


To implement this decree, in the first half of September 1941, Crimean authorities ordered the relocation of cattle herds, grain reserves, and stations for tractors and agricultural machines (MTS) outside the peninsula. It was scheduled to move cattle herds away from the whole peninsula, and indeed the Soviets boasted of having removed all "public" cattle, 700,000 head of cattle as well as 175,000 tons of grain from the Crimea. Only a small part of the herds was evacuated by land route through the Southern Ukraine; most of them were led through the harbor of Kerch.

In general, the evacuation of a Jewish kolkhoznik from the Crimea may be outlined as follows. Cattle were to be accompanied by people. Since many Jewish kolkhozes pursued cattle-breeding and grew grain, a small number of their inhabitants were assigned to accompany the transportation of cattle, grain and machinery until they arrived safely outside the Crimea. Although there are no general data which could shed light on the execution of the Jewish kolkhozes in evacuating the cattle, a Soviet wartime report emphasizes that despite serious logistical difficulties, many kolkhozes in Fraidorf raion (i.e., predominately Jewish ones) excelled themselves in the fulfillment of the evacuation directives.

45 Sirota, Tak derzhalas' Kerch, 37.
46 Idem, p. 37.
47 Memorandum, "On the work of the Crimean District Committee of VKP(b) in guiding the partisan movement and the underground work in the Crimea", February 13, 1943, DAARK: P-1/1/2144a.
49 By 1939, Jews produced 12.5% of the Crimean grain, and nearly 11% of all field crops; the colonists possessed 20% of its sheep (Jonathan Dekel-Chen, Shopkeepers and Peddlers into Soviet Farmers: Jewish Agricultural Colonization in Crimea and Southern Ukraine, 1924–1941 [PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2001], 363; Yehezkiel Keren, Hityashvut Yehudit Haqla'it BeHatsy Ha'yi Krym, 1922–1947 (Jerusalem: Zak, 1973), 143.
50 Information resume of the Crimean District Committee of VKP(b) on the rise
The authorities intended to evacuate only key workers needed to accompany the cattle, but the criteria for selecting these workers were not clear. According to the testimony of a contemporary high-ranking Crimean Communist official, the directives from above, were sometimes not followed, as "the check-up revealed that in some kolkhozes and sovkhozes entirely unsuitable people – teenagers, women with small children were assigned to this work".\textsuperscript{51}

Jewish testimonies also suggest that from time to time lone women were assigned to accompany the cattle,\textsuperscript{52} at times – whole families\textsuperscript{53} or mothers with children,\textsuperscript{54} and occasionally – elderly persons.\textsuperscript{55} Some of them were evacuated as was the case with a Jewish woman assigned to accompany 117 cows from the Jewish kolkhoz Oktyabr'sk near Simferopol towards Kerch.\textsuperscript{56} Others, like an old Jewish kolkhoznik, despite being assigned to accompany the evacuation of the herd from the village of Friling, were unable to leave and stayed in the Crimea,\textsuperscript{57} or perished in the course of the evacuation.\textsuperscript{58} When the Red Army regained its control over the Kerch area in January–May 1942, Soviet...
authorities made an attempt to evacuate cattle from the area. The cattle were indeed moved to the Soviet mainland, but the Jews who accompanied it were unable to evacuate and perished. Whatever the result, the juxtaposition of evidence suggests that only few Jews left the Crimea as they accompanied the cattle or grain.

Nevertheless, it appears that the impact of the government policy on the evacuation of the Jewish kolkhozniki went beyond its narrowly defined goals. As the Jewish kolkhozes were situated off the main rescue routes by which refugees made their way out of the Crimea, little information was available to their inhabitants on the dimensions and proximity of the danger. As a result, the drastic policy of evacuating the herds and grain (the raison d'être of the villages) made a profound impression on the masses of Jewish kolkhozniki, and admittedly led them to consider evacuation. The evacuation from some Jewish kolkhozes was made easier as their administration run by the Jews circumvented a complicated bureaucratic procedure and quickly issued evacuation permits for those Jews who were eager to leave. Thus, it appears that the evacuation of masses of Jewish kolkhozniki, however incomplete, must be attributed largely to these "side effects" of the Soviet evacuation policy.

**Conclusion**

Appraisals made by individuals differ diametrically and range from the remark by a contemporary Jewish official in charge of evacuation of the cattle in the Kirov raion made in late October 1941, "Jewish kolkhozes

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60 Station Slavianskaia, village Zolskoe, diary of Ioffe, entry from November 10, 1941, DAARK: P-156/1/31, p. 31; Akt No 90 of the Commission of Kabardino-Balkar Republic, July 14, 1943, GARF: 7021/7/109, p. 186.
61 Village Fraileben, testimony of Ita Al'tman, June 28, 1999 (*Vospominaniya zhytelei*, 56).
make a sad impression since their inhabitants abandoned them”, 62 and the testimony of a Jew who encountered "the people who visited there [these places] after the war":

The bigger part of the Crimean Jews did not succeed in escaping […] Many Jews, in particular the kolkhozniki, were forced to make their way back to their places of residence. After the occupation the Germans began their destruction. 63

And to a Soviet cliché published in Einikait in July 1945:

The Germans clenched their teeth while seeing the Jewish settlements in the Crimea whose people fled in a timely fashion and took with them cattle and harvest, which they were able to collect from the fields. 64

Viewed from today’s perspective, the impact of the evacuation of the Jewish kolkhozniki from the Crimea is difficult to gauge. Overall, the authorities prioritized the evacuation of cattle and grain over that of the kolkhozes' population. One of the by-products of this policy was the fact that important capacities allocated to evacuate the cattle and grain such as ships became unavailable for the evacuation of people. Furthermore, the departure of masses of Jews from the Crimean kolkhozes was impaired by a number of weighty factors (deficient transportation and lack of contacts with Jewish refugees), which reduced the dimensions of evacuation of Jewish inhabitants of the Crimean rural areas below the general estimate for the region to as low as 30%-40%.

62 Diary of Ioffe, entry from October 25, 1941, DAARK: P-156/1/31, p. 29.
63 Letter of Yishaiahu Shreibstein, inhabitant of Simferopol before the war (Benjamin West, Be Ḥevle Kelaya: Yehude Rusya BaShoah HaNatsit, 1941–1943 [Tel Aviv: 'Arkhiyon Ha'Avoda, 1963], 145).
64 Einikait, July 5, 1945.
At the same time, this appraisal should be approached with an eye to the unique conditions in the Crimean countryside. In these areas, the Soviet evacuation policy apparently presented the only opportunity for numerous inhabitants of Jewish kolkhozes isolated from information and major escape routes to flee the peninsula. The dimensions of this phenomenon were considerable and by all accounts, far exceeded what was needed for the removal of cattle and grain from German reach. It appears that the flight, under the disguise of the state-run evacuation program of Jewish kolhozniki, was facilitated by other factors, unique to them. These included Jewish administration, which was more sympathetic towards potential Jewish evacuees than the ordinary Soviet bureaucracy, and "a herd instinct" that was likely more characteristic of the behavior of close-knit Jewish communities and somewhat reminiscent of traditional Jewish society.