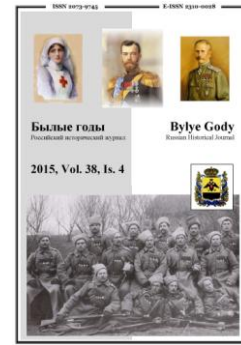




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## Evacuees and social stress on the Soviet home front: the Iaroslavl' experience, 1941

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### Abstract

This article examines the everyday experiences of evacuees and how Iaroslavl' residents and authorities dealt with the resulting social stresses and challenges amidst the exigencies of total war. It does so primarily on the basis of reports and data from Iaroslavl' district communist party organisations, held in the Center for the Documentation of Contemporary History of the Iaroslavl' Region State Archive (TsDNI GAiAO), on 'accommodating' (*razemeshchenie*) evacuees in the region. Comparison between these reports and *Sovnarkom* resolutions on the way evacuees were supposed to be dealt with and the resources allocated to them reveals a wide gap between official expectations and the harsh reality of life for the evacuees, especially children.

The article concentrates on the critical summer and autumn of 1941, which saw a flood of evacuees, women and children, the elderly and sick, followed by a further influx as the enemy threatened Moscow and even Iaroslavl' itself, necessitating re-evacuations, children in particular, by water and rail.

**Keywords:** social stress, the everyday experiences, children, war, victory, soviet.

### Introduction

The Axis attack on the Soviet Union, on 22 June 1941, caught Soviet authorities off-guard. Red Army military doctrine boasted that any invader would be rapidly repelled. War would be fought on enemy soil. In these circumstances, Moscow made no specific plans to evacuate Soviet civilians in the event of invasion or occupation. But the unexpected rout of the allegedly invincible Red Army changed all that. Within two days of Hitler's 'treacherous' invasion, as Molotov called it, a Council for Evacuation was established [1]. On 5 July, the Council of People's Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) adopted a resolution on 'the evacuation of the population in wartime', which required local authorities to receive and accommodate evacuees, and provide them with the necessary medical, food and material support [2]. Over the next 18 months, an estimated 10 to 17 million Soviet citizens were evacuated; an extraordinary feat which 'had no precedent' in such a short time [3]. By mid-July 1941, in the Iaroslavl' region, 250 kilometres northeast of Moscow, the communist party leadership had established a 'Department for Evacuation' and set up evacuation reception centres at two major railway junctions: one in the regional capital of Iaroslavl' and the other in the industrial city of Rybinsk [4]. By this time, the *Wehrmacht* had penetrated up to 600 kilometres into Soviet territory. By this time too, the first evacuees, primarily from Leningrad and Moscow, were streaming into the Iaroslavl' region, mainly by rail but also by ship along the Volga river. All told, during the course of the war, some one million people flooded into this sparsely populated agricultural region, increasing its pre-war population of 2.28 million by nearly half as much again, two thirds of whom lived in the countryside [5].

### Sources and method

This article examines the everyday experiences of evacuees and how Iaroslavl' residents and authorities dealt with the resulting social stresses and challenges amidst the exigencies of total war. It does so primarily on the basis of reports and data from Iaroslavl' district communist party organisations, held in the Center for the Documentation of Contemporary History of the Iaroslavl' Region State Archive (TsDNI GAiAO), on 'accommodating' (*razemeshchenie*) evacuees in the region. Comparison between these reports

and *Sovnarkom* resolutions on the way evacuees were supposed to be dealt with and the resources allocated to them reveals a wide gap between official expectations and the harsh reality of life for the evacuees, especially children.

The article concentrates on the critical summer and autumn of 1941, which saw a flood of evacuees, women and children, the elderly and sick, followed by a further influx as the enemy threatened Moscow and even Iaroslavl' itself, necessitating re-evacuations, children in particular, by water and rail. The influx in less than six weeks by 1 August of almost 120,000 desperate, often ill and traumatised, evacuees put extraordinary strains on the already stretched resources of the Iaroslavl' region, itself virtually on the frontline. In looking at how evacuees, regional inhabitants and authorities coped, or otherwise, this paper raises vital questions about the roles that political authority and particularly social solidarity played in the Soviet war effort.

### Results

According to official figures, as of 1 August 1941 a total of 118,366 evacuees had arrived in the Iaroslavl' region, the bulk of them from Leningrad and Moscow: 91,301 and 4,577 respectively. Three quarters of these were children (90,252), only a quarter of whom (23,631) were 'accompanied by their parents'; the remainder (67,754) arrived in 'organised order', accompanied by 6,880 supervisors, one for every 10 children [6].

On paper, from the moment evacuees arrived at the 'evacuation point', they were supposed to be looked after by local authorities; they would be met, have medical and document checks, be provided with information, and conducted to a cafeteria. Food kiosks, baths, medical facilities would be provided, and medical checks conducted 'to avert the spread of diseases'. For those delayed at the evacuation points, temporary hostel accommodation, rations and hot meals were to be available; in addition, children were supposed to receive 'eggs, butter and milk' [7]. The entire process of evacuation, settlement and care for the evacuees was allegedly, as a letter from evacuees to the local newspaper later put it, 'imbued with the Stalin-spirit of concern [*Stalinskaia zabota*] for the individual possible only in our Soviet country' [8]. The reality, of course, was otherwise, in a poor rural region still reeling from forced collectivisation and industrialisation, and the specific social dislocation caused by the construction of the massive Rybinsk reservoir and hydroelectric scheme.

When it came to evacuation from major cities, alongside enterprises and key employees, the Soviet privileged were given priority; particularly the families of political and military leaders and the intelligentsia. Children of Leningrad writers were among the first to be evacuated to Iaroslavl' [9]. A meeting of mothers on 23 July 1941 who accompanied them voted unanimously to thank the Literary Fund camp administrators and Iaroslavl' local authorities for housing the children. But the issues facing local authorities and their priorities were already apparent: food and accommodation, particularly for babies; health, medication and sanitation, including paediatric care; schooling, work and political education for older children, up to 15 years. While sustenance and accommodation were major concerns for those administering evacuees, especially children, the prevention of diseases and the maintenance of social order on the home front were at least as important, if not more so. 'Strengthening labour discipline and political-education' among older children (and evacuees in general), was already a high priority for regional political and administrative leaders [10].

Life for newly arrived children from Leningrad in the Yaroslavl' backwoods was very austere. Dispatched to ill-equipped, rural schools and kindergartens without bedding, children often slept on the floor. Not surprisingly, in such an environment, 'scarlet fever, mumps, and whooping cough' had broken out. In at least one district, the food supply was 'exceptionally bad'. 1812 chaperoned children received 'virtually none of the promised milk, meat, sugar, oil or eggs'. The arrival of a further 1377 children with their mothers halved the available rations (*norma*) in a district where food stocks (*raipotrebsoiuz*) 'could not meet the norms for children'. Not even prioritised parental status guaranteed foodstuffs for newly arrived 'wives and families of servicemen, workers and officials from Leningrad and Moscow'. They received 'nothing' [11].

Evacuated children might have been saved from aerial bombardment, but it was no guarantee of their wellbeing. Scathing, secret reports from the Iaroslavl' Prosecutor's office, as early as mid-July 1941, to the regional communist party secretary, condemned the 'scandalous ... neglectful, criminal treatment of children' by organisations responsible for child evacuees. Among the findings:

- abysmal accommodation, without beds and heating;
- inadequate food and nutrition;
- rife infections and illnesses with little or no sanitary measures;
- no recreational activities;
- neglectful supervision resulting in accidents and drownings;
- and, nursery-aged children sleeping with adults, in one case causing venereal infection.

Faced with these horrendous findings, the prosecutor threatened that authorities that did not improve children's welfare would be held responsible [12].

These fraught conditions, bordering on chaos as regional and district officials struggled to cope with waves of evacuees, were compounded by the 'daily' arrival of hundreds of mothers from Leningrad, not yet under lethal siege, searching for and taking their children back home; a situation indicating the initial evacuation of children had been undertaken without parental consent. These mothers were followed by other

mothers, authorised to travel by Leningrad authorities, who had learned of their children's terrible conditions and determined to retrieve them. The result was 'enormous disorganisation ... crowding railway stations' and even disrupting farming by mothers buying desperately needed horses to convey their children back to the railway stations [13].

Given the scarcity of work and poor quality of accommodation in the cities and towns, in the main, evacuees were sent to live in collective farms (*kolkhozy*); either with families or in separate houses. Often they were sent to where there were 'labour shortages' [14]. Often too, the impoverished collective farms to which they were sent could barely feed themselves, let alone evacuees and their families. Although some collective farms were able to provide up to three 'community' meals (*obshchestvennoe pitanie*) a day, in some cases supplemented by one kilogram of bread from district food stocks (*raipotrebsoiuz*), where they existed, the 'majority' of evacuees, especially those on poorer farms, had to feed themselves. Those who had the money would buy food; those without would sell personal items, such as clothes, in exchange for food. Those without 'money, shoes or clothes', such as children who had 'lost their parents', were in 'dire' straits [15].

Overwhelmingly, the evacuees were 'city dwellers', mainly 'white collar workers' (*kontorskie sluzhashchie*): 'artists, teachers, engineers, technicians, doctors, tailors' [16]. Some of these found work in the towns. But most were consigned to the collective farms. Here lay real sources of tension. Although unused to farm work, nevertheless, many of these urban workers were praised for their contributions to farm work, even exceeding their output quotas. Moreover, an official report observed, 'where evacuees go out to work on a daily basis, friendly relations have been established between them and the collective farmers.' [17] The same report hailed the 'overwhelming majority [who] express hatred towards German fascism and gratitude towards Soviet power for saving them from Hitlerite terror.'

Relations were otherwise when evacuees declined to work or despised the farmers. In one district (Galich), a 'majority' of Leningrad evacuees made no effort to help with the harvest. In another (Chukhlom) evacuees, from Lithuania and Latvia, were reportedly anti-Soviet, or 'contemptuous of physical labour and reluctant to work with our collective farmers or Jewish arrivals'. Iaroslavl' authorities were deeply suspicious of these Baltic refugees, among whom were not only 'qualified intelligentsia' and trades people but also a Jewish, 'bourgeois element': manufacturers and large shop proprietors. While the 'majority want to work... not wishing to be seen as spongers (*izhdeventsi*)', the 'arrogant attitudes' of others rang 'alarm bells' [18]: One was reported to have told his or her fellow evacuees, 'It is stupid to work so hard on the collective farm, when it feeds you so badly'; another refused to 'work with the common people [*chern*]. In one district, 'enmity' between Jews and Latvians spilled over into denouncing each other for anti-Soviet views, while a Soviet official presumed to be Jewish was beaten [19].

Such attitudes and actions, coupled with the fact that the evacuees were generally better off than most of their *kolkhoz* hosts, engendered resentment and tensions that caused regional authorities 'serious concern':

'As a rule, the *kolkhozniki* are considerate towards the new arrivals; even in the most impoverished farms sharing the little money and foodstuffs they have with them. But there are also occasions when the *kolkhozniki* reproach the new arrivals (sometimes reducing them to tears) because they "eat our bread and receive 500 grams of bread when there are collective farms that do not even have bread." Some *kolkhozniki* make fun of the ignorance of the new arrivals about farm work and their unsuitability for life in the countryside. On some farms... the new arrivals are given work, but nobody shows them how to do it.' [20]

### Conclusion

The experiences and treatment of the first wave of evacuees, especially children, by both Iaroslavl' authorities and inhabitants points to a range different behaviours. Social order and control was the number one priority of both Union and regional state and party officials in chaotic circumstances caused by unexpected military rout, retreat and flight. But the health and well-being of evacuees was also high on their agenda. However, that was often not the case with those charged with immediate responsibility for evacuees, despite communist party injunctions. Under resourced, poorly trained or remunerated, they often neglected, took advantage of, or abused an exceptionally vulnerable group of people. Likewise, the response of evacuees' regional hosts, principally in the countryside, varied widely from a willingness to share accommodation and food to outright resentment against outsiders whom they saw as privileged and contemptuous of their backward country cousins, so to speak. Examined up close, the evacuee experience in Iaroslavl' is not a pretty picture. Amid conditions of acute social stress and distress, it raises questions about the degree to which a specifically Soviet, socialist, 'Stalin-spirit of concern' and social solidarity contributed to the war effort and ultimately victory.

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