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Review

Book review: *The British Campaign for Soviet Jewry, 1966–1991: Human Rights and Exit Permits*, by John Cooper

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The British Campaign for Soviet Jewry, 1966–1991: Human Rights and Exit Permits, John Cooper (Manchester: i2i, 2023), ISBN 978-1914933462, 498 pp., £19.99.

Until recently, scholars had largely neglected the story of the struggle to free Soviet Jewry. Whereas Eastern Europe was once the centre of world Jewry, today there are only about half a million Jews remaining, with only about 155,000 in Russia itself. In addition, the Soviet exodus to Israel in the 1990s radically changed the demography and development of Israel, contributing to its economic and technological development. John Cooper's study of the British campaign for Soviet Jewry fills an important lacuna in this history. While several key works have been written about the role of the United States, Canada, and Australia, this is the first comprehensive study of Britain's role in this struggle, and adds to earlier work by Colin Shindler.

Cooper has written a meticulously researched and detailed history of the British campaign. He has taken a broad approach, beginning with a chapter on the Stalinist era and including an extensive chapter on the refusenik trials of the 1970s. While this background information is important, particularly for readers who are not familiar with the situation in the Soviet Union, at times the British role within this broader story is lost. The last chapter, entitled "The Mass Emigration", covers the gradual opening up of the Soviet Union, beginning with the period 1986–89, with a detailed discussion of collaboration between Britain and America in the late 1980s in terms of human rights, rather than focusing on the mass migration beginning in 1991.

Cooper's broad approach provides a clear picture of Soviet ambivalence to its Jewish population, leaving what Cooper describes as "a tainted legacy" (p. 22). The teaching of Hebrew was forbidden from the early years of the Soviet Union and, during the period of the Stalinist purges in 1936–39, Soviet claims of "Zionist imperialist oppression of the Palestinian Arabs" became "a vicious propaganda campaign" against Jews (p. 26). This legacy needs to be understood in order to appreciate contemporary anti-Zionist formulations of Israel as a settler-colonial state.

The book provides much attention to the Women's Campaign, particularly to the group known as the 35s, middle-class housewives who rebelled against the more conservative approaches of the preceding generation. Their campaign began in 1971 following the arrest of the

Soviet Jewish activist Raiza Palatnik, and continued until the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Cooper writes: "[The women] had the time, energy, enthusiasm and independence of spirit to accomplish something for themselves" (p. 88). He demonstrates their imaginative approach, initially under the leadership of Barbara Oberman, then Doreen Gainsford, and, after her *aliyah* to Israel, with Margaret Rigal and Rita Ekert, who took the campaign in a different and more political direction. A particularly compelling section in the book deals with the release of the dancers Valery and Galina Panov, and the role played by the Prime Minister Harold Wilson in their release. Cooper analyses why the Russians "changed course so late in the day" (p. 125). He describes this episode, led by the Committee for the Release of Valery and Galina Panov, as "the most successful of the women's pressure groups" (p. 144).

Cooper also discusses the strong connections between Rigal and Ekert and Margaret Thatcher, an important relationship during the key years of Thatcher's prime ministership in the 1980s. However, Cooper fails to fully explain Thatcher's more ambivalent position until the concluding chapter, where he discusses the conservative approach of the British Foreign Office which constrained her activities within "safe guidelines" (p. 301). This approach had also affected Harold Wilson, who took a stronger position in support of Soviet Jews. In 1974, Foreign Office officials prepared a briefing paper which expressed concerns about the women's tactics (p. 165). In contrast, after Wilson's resignation due to ill health, his successor, James Callaghan, shared the Foreign Office's conservative position and refused to meet the Soviet Jewish dissident Vladimir Bukovsky after his release in 1976. David Owen, the Foreign Secretary under Callaghan, was also ambivalent, even though he was a strong advocate of human rights. In a speech to the Zionist Federation in February 1978, Owen attacked the Jewish organizations for "concerning themselves exclusively with the human rights of Soviet Jewry" (p. 193). He also refused to meet Alexander Slepak, son of the well-known refuseniks Vladimir and Masha Slepak, when he visited London, an approach that Thatcher reversed when she became prime minister. This tension between the political leadership and the civil bureaucracy was an important feature throughout the Soviet Jewry campaign, not only in Britain but also in other democratic countries.

Cooper does stress the importance of the philosopher Bertrand Russell, whose role in the campaign was "extensive" (p. 58), as well as the historian Sir Martin Gilbert and Michael Sherbourne, but other key players in the campaign are largely neglected. The British poet, novelist, and human

rights activist Emanuel Litvinoff is described briefly (pp. 52–3), as is Nan Griefer, who took over from Colin Shindler, the first editor of *Jews in the USSR*, the weekly compilation of information on Soviet Jewry, as well as running the Contemporary Jewish Library, which was only closed in 1991. Litvinoff published a monthly journal, *Jews in Eastern Europe*, from the late 1950s to the late 1980s, contributing significantly to the British and indeed the global campaign. From the 1960s, these roles were secretly supported by Israel through Lishkat ha-kesher (the Liaison Bureau). Griefer's work enabled close collaboration with the Israeli office, later known as Nativ, headed for many years by Nehemiah Levanon.

Another important organization, the National Council for Soviet Jewry, was formed in 1975, with the British Board of Deputies' president in an ex-officio role. The Board's funding for the National Council was supplemented by Nativ. However, there is less focus on the National Council, which is discussed mainly in contrast to the 35s, even though the National Council was recognized as "the authoritative voice of the community by the government on Soviet Jewry issues" (p. 267). Indeed, Thatcher took the Council seriously, meeting its representatives, but "she invariably rebuffed attempts by the Women's Campaign to speak to her directly" (p. 321).

There were often tensions between the Israeli approach – which focused on *aliyah* to Israel and was regarded by some British activists as too conservative – and that of more radical players, as well as rivalry between the various organizations involved with Soviet Jewry. This led to clashes that at times significantly inhibited the success of the movement. While Cooper hints at these clashing positions and rivalries and notes their negative impact – such as the lack of coordination with Gorbachev's visit to London in 1984 (p. 327) – he fails to analyse clearly their differing positions. Indeed, other key actors in the British campaign such as the presidents of the National Council June Jacobs, Andrew Balcolme, Arieh Handler, and Neil Bradman are referred to only briefly. Yet the tensions and personality conflicts between the various groups constitute an important part of this history. In Chapter 8, Cooper notes that it was the internal disputes in the National Council over Gorbachev's 1989 visit to London which led to "fissures in its ranks" (p. 431), resulting in Bradman's resignation. In this chapter Cooper also includes a brief discussion about the All-Parliamentary Committee for the release of Soviet Jewry, stressing its relationship with the Women's Campaign and even more so with the National Council (pp. 460–61).

The ineffectiveness of the British Board of Deputies, led by Barnett Janner in the 1950s and 1960s, is highlighted by Cooper who correctly argues that it was the student movement, with the assistance of the Lishkat ha-kesher, which was central to the campaign's initiation in Britain. He draws parallels to the student activism in France and the United States in the 1960s. In particular, he highlights the students' initiative during the visit to London of the Soviet premier Alexei Kosygin in 1966 when 2,200 students marched to the Soviet embassy (p. 75).

These quibbles aside, Cooper's book fills an important lacuna within the history of the global campaign for Soviet Jewry. Although he stresses that British efforts were largely secondary to the United States, his meticulous research reveals how important the issue was to British Jewry and how much energy they expended on its behalf.

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