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Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924–1941*

Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924–1941
by Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen

Review by: Robert Weinberg

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Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet**Power, 1924–1941.** By *Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen*.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005. Pp. xviii + 366. \$45.00.

The agrarianization of Jews occupied a prominent position in critiques of European Jewry from the Enlightenment into the twentieth century. One impulse behind the campaign to promote Jewish agricultural settlement is the timeworn belief that European Jewry's involvement in trade, commerce, and finance led to an abnormal occupational profile in which Jews, engaged for the most part in work perceived as non-productive, exploited other Jews. "Normalizing" the Jews' occupational profile—essentially, transforming Jewish shopkeepers and *shmata* (rag) dealers into hardworking, productive citizens involved in physical labor—would help eliminate a root cause of European antisemitism and strengthen the Jews' case for civic emancipation in many parts of Europe. From Jewish chicken farmers in New Jersey and California to Jewish *gauchos* on the pampas of Argentina, from Jewish dairy farmers in upstate New York to *kibbutzim* in Palestine, all these endeavors testify to the commitment, vast sums of money, and enormous effort expended to turn Jews into farmers. In the Soviet Union, plans to resettle Jews on the land found expression not only in Birobidzhan, located along the Soviet-Chinese border, but also in Crimea and southern Ukraine, the focus of *Farming the Red Land*.

Between the mid-1920s and late 1930s the philanthropic American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC, or Joint) funded the settlement of 150,000 shtetl Jews on approximately 250 newly established agricultural colonies under the auspices of its colonization agency, the Joint Agricultural Corporation (or Agro-Joint). Under the leadership of Joseph Rosen, a Moscow-born agronomist who emigrated to the United States in 1903 and returned to his homeland to assist Jewish victims in the aftermath of world war, revolution, and civil war, Agro-Joint invested \$17 million in the effort to turn Soviet Jews into farmers on approximately 1 million acres of land allocated by the Kremlin. Realizing that it lacked the financial and administrative resources to foster Jewish colonization in the vast countryside, the Soviet government welcomed the efforts of American Jewry to help alleviate the poverty of the 3 million or so Jews living in the Soviet Union. In 1924 the Kremlin and Agro-Joint entered into a contractual relationship that established the legal basis of the latter's activities in the Soviet Union.

According to Jonathan Dekel-Chen, an unusual set of circumstances combined to set the stage for Jewish agricultural settlement: volunteers willing to move to the land, wealthy benefactors willing to finance the colonies, and government officials willing to overlook the ideological distaste of cooperating with foreign capitalists in order to relieve economic distress in the former Pale of Settlement. Moreover, the colonies enabled the Kremlin to repress obdurate national minorities in the region that were known for their resistance to control from the center.

Dekel-Chen argues that the Jewish colonies in Crimea and southern Ukraine should not be seen as failures. He stresses that Rosen never envisioned a permanent role for the organization. Rather, Agro-Joint's purpose was to establish stable, self-sufficient settlements whose existence would be guaranteed by solid financial, organizational, and material foundations. The colonies lived up to these expectations (as witnessed by the relatively high standards of living), winning the support of many Soviet officials who appreciated the relative prosperity of the colonies and reasoned that Agro-Joint had fulfilled its mission. For example, the state drew upon the experiences of Agro-Joint and the Jewish colonies in the campaign to collectivize agriculture. The colonies' organizational structure and farming techniques (such as tractor teams, template for the

Machine Tractor Stations) were collectivist in practice and informed in part the state's collectivization policies. As Dekel-Chen notes, "key features of the future collectivization policy existed, in embryo," in the early Jewish colonies established in the mid-1920s (142–43). Even though Soviet officials and Agro-Joint did not always see eye to eye, the government respected the results of Jewish land resettlement and therefore chose not to dissolve the colonies after it forced Agro-Joint to close up shop and stopped the flow of American money in 1937–38. Indeed, it took the murderous policies of the Germans to destroy this unique experiment in social engineering that reaped benefits for the Soviet economy.

Farming the Red Land is a major contribution to the scholarship on Soviet Jewry, the Kremlin's policy toward national minorities, and the weaknesses of government power in the Soviet countryside during the 1920s and 1930s. Drawing upon his in-depth research in archives in Israel, the former Soviet Union, and the United States, Dekel-Chen offers a sophisticated analysis that stimulates the reader to contemplate a variety of issues such as Jewish nationalism and identity, American Jewry's efforts to help impoverished Jews in the Soviet Union, and the Stalinist politics from the vantage point of agrarianization and productivization.

ROBERT WEINBERG

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Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar. By *Simon Sebag Montefiore*.

New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 2003. Pp. xxvii + 785. \$19.00.

Stalin: A Biography. By *Robert Service*.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press/Belknap, 2005. Pp. xviii + 715. \$29.95.

More than fifty years after his death, Joseph Stalin continues to excite both passion and interest. In many parts of the world, people's attitudes to Stalin tell us a lot about their attitudes to contemporary political events, while for those who are seeking to understand the past, much about the Stalin period in the Soviet Union has remained unclear. The partial opening of the Soviet archives following the collapse of the Soviet Union has enabled many of the uncertainties of the past to be rendered more explicable. Simon Montefiore's *Stalin* and Robert Service's *Stalin* are both beneficiaries of the greater archival access Western scholars have been able to enjoy; indeed, neither could have been written in its current form without such access. But they are very different books.

Montefiore's book is less a biography of Stalin than a study of the dynamics of the so-called magnates who made up Stalin's inner circle and of their families. It is based on significant archival research and memoir material and seeks to provide a narrative of personal relationships and interactions at the apex of the Soviet elite. This is an ambitious task; the Soviet elite has never been viewed in this way before, and Montefiore succeeds in painting a vivid picture. In its essentials, it is consistent with the more partial glimpses that we have had for a long time through the writings of people such as Svetlana Allilueva, Milovan Djilas, and Nikita Khrushchev. The personal power of Stalin, the sense of threat experienced by individual members of the elite at various times, the combination of competition and collegiality of Stalin's colleagues, and the general character of elite life are all brought out vividly in Montefiore's book.

The great weakness of this picture, however, is the relative absence of a broader