Yaacov Ro’i, ed.  

Yaacov Ro’i is a leading authority on post WWII Soviet Jewish politics and history. He is the author, editor and co-editor of numerous books on the subject. The current volume is his latest edited collection of essays, many of which were delivered at a Hebrew University conference in 2007 titled “The Jewish National Movement in the USSR: Awakening and Struggle, 1967–1989.” No one is better situated than Ro’i to examine the Jewish drive to leave the USSR, because he has been working on this subject since the 1970s, when it was a hot political topic rather than a historical one. Among his sources, readers can find recent interviews with former refuseniks now living as retirees in Israel interspersed among interviews conducted with struggling dissidents in the 1970s Soviet Union. Such intimate, long-term knowledge of the topic from both scholarly and personal proximity provides a wealth of perspective for the reader. Furthermore, while there has been considerable attention given to the worldwide Jewish and non-Jewish support for Soviet Jewish emigration, as Ro’i points out in his introduction, there has been a comparative lack of serious scholarly study of the Soviet Jewish movement itself: what drove it, what shaped its common goals, and how it played out inside the USSR. This volume is an important contribution in this direction.

The focus of this volume is the Jewish collective drive to leave the Soviet Union during the 1970s and 1980s, but within this narrative are included multiple perspectives that address the complexity of the phenomenon from sociological, historical, religious, and political considerations. What were the particular circumstances facing Soviet Jews that drove many to seek emigration? What was the impact of international pressure on the emigration movement? What was the attitude of the Soviet authorities and the non-Jewish population toward Jews’ desire to leave? These are among the questions addressed by the essays collected in this work, arguably the most comprehensive scholarly study of the subject in one volume thus far. These essays attempt to place the Jewish movement of the late Soviet era within the broader context of Soviet dissident movements, consider its meaning for contemporary Jewish identity, and assess its impact on the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself, given the rather negative effect of hundreds of thousands of young, educated people clamoring vigorously to depart what was conscientiously being presented to the world as the proletarian paradise on earth.
Ro’i does not simply prolong his earlier study to include the last Soviet decades. While demonstrating that this drive was clearly a strong and far-reaching movement, he hesitates to call it a national movement. Indeed, despite consistent attempts to portray the Jewish emigration movement as Zionist by the Soviet regime, it was in fact much more complicated. The desire to leave the USSR was first voiced by Zionists, but it grew wider to include those that had no desire to go to Israel. Despite the negative attitude from some activists of the Jewish movement toward the “dropouts” (those that chose to go to the West, especially the United States, rather than Israel) Ro’i points out that over the long term, broadening the terms of the movement beyond aliyah gave it a tactical advantage by making it more a human rights issue than a Zionist one, thereby enabling American politicians and Jewish groups to back it, which they would not have done otherwise. This balanced perspective is representative of the level of critical scholarship in this collection of essays, the preponderance of which were written by authors either based or educated in Israel, where a more Zionist narrative would have been the norm in the not too distant past. This volume thus stands as further evidence that a re-examination by Israeli scholars (and others) of Israel’s erstwhile “search for a usable past” is continuing.

The volume is divided into six parts, each consisting of two or three chapters. The first part is an overview by Ro’i himself, in which he lays out the terms of the movement beginning with a description of life conditions faced by Soviet Jews that led to a desire to depart. Unlike circumstances in the Russian Empire, when Jews faced discrimination as a group that prevented their large-scale assimilation into the dominant culture, post-WWII Soviet discrimination targeted a Jewish population that was already assimilated and typically looked upon their own separated, national past as backward. Jews were moved toward emigration, that is, they gave up on a future in the Soviet Union as Jews, because they faced dramatically increasing discrimination as individuals in universities and workplaces. Seeing no future for themselves or, more importantly, their children, emigration, with all the associated risks and troubles, became the only alternative. The deepening divide between Jews and official Soviet society opened into an unbridgeable chasm following the Israeli-Arab War of 1967 and the attempted airplane hijacking in Leningrad in 1970, both of which are now seen as launching the movement. Ro’i describes the numerous means of campaigning available to Soviet Jews: petitions, demonstrations, samizdat, the ulpanim (grass-roots Hebrew classes), various seminars and contact with and appeal to foreigners. He stresses the latter, which was imperative for making the movement a wider phenomenon not easily silenced.