

Research Reports

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Central Asians in Russia: Navigating Multiethnicity in Soviet and Post-Soviet Urban Worlds

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Central Asian migration to Russia's "two capitals" of St. Petersburg and Moscow has swelled in recent years. New arrivals, attracted by economic opportunity, are joining the significant diaspora from the Soviet period. The collapse of the USSR has provided new challenges to Central Asians in Russia, who face official and unofficial harassment from a host society no longer bound to Soviet ideology. Cultural, linguistic, and economic links and legacies nonetheless continue to bind Central Asia to Russia. Migrant labor fuels the growth of Russia's showcase cities. Central Asian migrants contribute substantially to their home countries' economies as well. One recent study has estimated that Tajik migrants contribute between one-third and one-half of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (Pannier 2004).

This paper presents initial research for my new project, which will examine the Central Asian diaspora in Russia in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The project has several goals. It will investigate the role of the Soviet state, society, and economy in shaping migration patterns from Central Asian republics, particularly the Tajik and Uzbek SSRs. It will consider late Soviet cities as multinational "contact zones." It will analyze the effect of the Soviet collapse on the volume and patterns of migration. Primarily, however, I will examine the process of migration through the eyes of Central Asians themselves. What motivated, or

forced, them to leave Central Asia? How did migration to Russia affect their material situation and their sense of identity? What were their relations with those they left behind and those they encountered in their new environments? I hope to tell provocative stories of how migrants navigated shifting, complex societies and eras to make new lives for themselves and their families.

This project seeks to contribute to a number of bodies of literature. Engaging diaspora studies, I will scrutinize interconnected relationships between the migrant, homeland, and host country (Shuval 2000) through the comparative prism of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, seeking new ways to conceptualize the genesis, evolution, and persistence of diaspora identities. I also expect to highlight migrants' complex calculations in deciding to remain in an increasingly hostile host society. Diaspora experiences will be used to fashion, in Stuart Hall's words, a "narrative of displacement" (Hall 1990: 236), as waves of migrants serve as dynamic and destabilizing forces within sending and host societies. As a contribution to urban and colonial studies, my conceptualization of St. Petersburg and Moscow as postcolonial cities joins them to other centers where peoples of the periphery struggle to find their place, yet have a profound influence at the "heart of empire" (Jacobs 1996: 38-102).

Preliminary research for this project was carried out in 2004-2005. My research assistant, MA student Lisa Greenspoon, interviewed Tajiks and Uzbeks in St. Petersburg in conjunction with her thesis work on the Afghan refugee community. We did not seek a representative sample. Initial interviewees, who were guaranteed anonymity, were recruited through Ms. Greenspoon's contacts at the

¹ The author thanks Lisa Greenspoon for her research work and Michael Rouland, Virginia Martin, and Jamilya Ukudeeva for their comments. Field research received clearance from the Ethics Committee at Carleton University.

St. Petersburg Red Cross; she then used the "snowball method" to recruit others. Interviews, in Russian, lasted between one and two hours. Ms. Greenspoon also gathered material through participant observation. Subjects whom she knew well would not repeat relevant, previously-recounted stories in a formal interview. Ms. Greenspoon interviewed ten Tajiks and four Uzbeks. Five had lived in Soviet Leningrad, and nine had arrived since the collapse. My goal was to gain an initial sense of issues confronting these migrants, and their view of the relationship between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras.

Central Asian migration to Russia is primarily a Soviet phenomenon. Communist leaders encouraged significant numbers of Central Asians to study at Leningrad and Moscow universities (Park 1957: 134-6). Large-scale migration began after World War II. The official 1970 Soviet census noted that Central Asians were more likely than those in other regions to migrate outside their own republics, with the RSFSR as their primary destination (Maksimov 1976: 248-9). Central Asians profited from the USSR's image as a multicultural society that offered superior rights and opportunities to formerly colonized populations. Leningrad and Moscow appeared to offer open arms towards repressed peoples of the world (Roman 2002: 2).

Racism lurked under the surface of the Russian-dominated state. Russian nationalist groups decried Central Asian migrants, claiming the latter's higher birth rates would dilute Russian superiority in the RSFSR and USSR (Bushnell 1990: 157). Central Asians' second-class citizenship in Russian cities was periodically confirmed. Moscow police swept poor, recently-migrated "Blacks," a term extended to those from the Caucasus and Central Asia, from the markets and streets in advance of the 1980 Olympics.² Yet Western and Soviet demographers agreed that labor shortages in the Russian core and demographic pressures in the Central Asian republics established Central Asian migration as a "major influence upon Soviet society" (Lewis et al. 1976: 354-81).

Following a dip in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, a new migratory wave has intensified since 1994-1995. An estimated two million labor migrants, including 600,000 from Tajikistan and 700,000 from Uzbekistan, have traveled to Russia,

where wages are often ten times higher than at home (Pannier 2004). Remittances from abroad play critical roles in local economies and family survival strategies (International Crisis Group 2003: 8, 51). Linguistic and cultural connections, as well as established networks, make Russia the destination of choice for Central Asian migrants. In St. Petersburg, police count Uzbeks and Tajiks behind Ukrainians and Belarusians as the largest illegal migrant nationalities (Titova 2004).

Our research sought to privilege migrants' agency within these wider trends. We first asked respondents their reasons for migrating. Those who arrived in the Soviet period claimed they had little choice, but no strong objection. Their degree program or employment dictated that they come to Leningrad. Post-Soviet arrivals unanimously cited economic motives. Existing networks of family and friends influenced their choice of St. Petersburg. All knew Russian very well before migrating. All had come directly to the city, except for one recent arrival who left Moscow for St. Petersburg due to high prices, a lack of job opportunities, and intense police harassment.

Migrants who had lived in Leningrad did not consider the Soviet collapse especially traumatic. One interviewee mentioned that it was welcome, given the uncertainties of Perestroika, with its combination of shortages and high prices. Others, when pressed, gave stock answers such as "life became harder, more expensive." One had lost his job at a dairy plant, while another lost her savings. One of our respondents' favorite phrases was "this would have never happened during Soviet times."

In terms of residence, those who arrived in the Soviet period stayed in the ubiquitous *obshchezhitie* [dormitory]. The difficulty of finding apartments forced students to live there even after finishing their studies. One couple, however, reported that they received from Soviet authorities a "normal" flat in St. Petersburg, something they said would never happen now. Those who arrived after the collapse, except for two students, stayed in increasingly crowded apartments of friends, dotted throughout the city. None complained about their conditions, but reports of Tajik migrant workers in Russia have noted that they often live in squalid, cramped quarters that include unused railroad cars (International Crisis Group 2003: 20).

The next questions dealt with the authorities. Interviewees were very reluctant to speak. Respondents speaking about the Soviet era claimed

² Personal communication with Diane P. Koenker, Urbana, Ill., USA, Fall 1994.

that relations with the authorities then were "normal." When pressed, they said variants of: "the police treated us the way they treated everyone else." Male interviewees spoke of changes in their attitudes towards the militia pre- and post-collapse. They reported a constant fear of being stopped and questioned. Specific examples of harassment were revealed outside the interview setting. Subjects described abusive behavior from police, who subjected them to humiliating searches. One recounted falling victim to a common police tactic that involved shaking down market traders at the end of the day, when they had the most cash. The Russian press has recorded incidents of police violence, including an April 2004 case when Moscow officers detained two Uzbeks, drove them into a forest, and beat them with batons until they paid \$400 (Moscow News 2004). Men and women reported intensified police harassment since 2001.

We then moved to relationships with ethnic Russians. All who lived in Soviet Leningrad reported that they mixed easily with Russians, as well as other nationalities. Respondents fondly recalled the "melting pot" of the dormitory. But when pressed, respondents admitted that their close friends were co-nationals. There was reticence in discussing present views on Russians during interviews. The standard "normal" response was trotted out. Outside the interview setting, one Tajik noted that her 17-year-old daughter blended in easily at an overwhelmingly Russian school. Tajik women nonetheless noted that they did not wear traditional clothing and spoke only Russian on the street. Respondents discussed neighborhoods where they felt uncomfortable, but fear of racists and skinheads was not pervasive. Tajik women discussed their "distaste" for Russians, particularly women. They denigrated Russian women's "permissive" child-rearing, "provocative" dress, and "loose" morals. Russian women were also accused of "manipulating" their husbands, driving these "weak" men to drink.

Asked about relations with their "native lands," all respondents reported sending money home. One with family still in Dushanbe said: "We came here to help our children!" None reported difficulties in transferring money, accomplished by bank transfers and five-day train rides between St. Petersburg and Central Asia. Recent reports have noted that migrants pose tempting targets for Kazakh and Uzbek border patrols and customs agents. All interviewees said that they had considered returning permanently. One reported that relatives, who told

her the situation in Tajikistan was far worse than in Russia, persuaded her to stay. Others have traveled back to Central Asia with the intention of settling, but returned due to a lack of job opportunities.

One remarkable difference between Soviet and post-Soviet migrants is their sense of St. Petersburg as "home." All "Leningraders," though they came as a result of state policy, considered St. Petersburg home. After the initial turmoil surrounding the Soviet collapse, they no longer contemplated returning to Central Asia. More recent migrants, who came as a result of individual choice, felt no such attachment. This division may be simply a function of time spent in the city. Yet I would argue that this is indicative of a far less inviting, if in some respects far more tempting, post-Soviet Russian urban space. New arrivals stated simply that between work, sleep, and finding affordable goods, they had no time to "enjoy" the city. They romanticize their homeland as a land of relaxation, sunshine and fresh melons, even as they foresee no opportunities to return.

Ms. Greenspoon did not ask certain questions, including our interviewees' legal status in St. Petersburg. The complexities and deliberate mismanagement of city registration systems have facilitated the deportation and abuse of thousands from Central Asia and the Caucasus (Roman 2002: 12). A February 2003 law requires foreigners who do not need visas to Russia (primarily inhabitants of the former Soviet states) to carry "migration cards." The Interior Ministry said the law will protect jobs for Russian citizens and that foreigners are responsible for 40 percent of crimes in St. Petersburg and Moscow (Munro 2003). Even before these cards were introduced, counterfeits were on sale in Khujand, Tajikistan (International Crisis Group 2003: 19). Documentation offers no guarantee against fines or detention, given the hostility towards "Black" migrants throughout the police and court system. Bribes continue to be the primary way to deal with the authorities in post-Soviet Russia. We believed questions surrounding this issue would, understandably, not be fully and truthfully answered, and perhaps result in the termination of the interview.

We also did not ask respondents how they earned money. Interviewees who volunteered the information worked (or had spouses who worked) in a variety of occupations, including university professor, lawyer, sous-chef, kiosk sales clerk, construction worker, produce seller, and auto

repairman. Many had found employment related to their training, another key reason for their presence in St. Petersburg. Respondents reported that while they integrated easily into primarily Russian workplaces, they did not associate with Russian colleagues after hours.

Our interviews and observations allowed an initial snapshot into individual migrant experiences. Over 2005-2006, I will undertake a thorough review of the literature on late Soviet and post-Soviet urbanization and migration and then conduct library and archival research and a more thorough round of interviews and observation. Ms. Greenspoon and I believe that an Uzbek or Tajik trained in Western social science methods would be the ideal person to aid me with interviews.

Central Asian migration continues unabated. Some argue that migration works as a safety valve in the Central Asian states, lessening the threat of massive youth unemployment, allowing those opposed to authoritarian governments to leave, and contributing heavily to domestic economies. Yet it also creates a "brain drain," with educated Uzbeks and Tajiks exploring futures in Russia. Central Asian officials, awakening to the scope of issues related to migration, have yet to formulate clear responses.³ In Russia, even as leading figures allow harassment, arbitrary detention, and violence against Asian minorities, economic and demographic supply and demand favor migration. The Soviet legacy assures continued close ties between Russia and Central Asia.

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³ The International Crisis Group, the International Organization for Migration, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have invited state officials to high-profile conferences on the issue in Dushanbe and Tashkent.