

FROM THE BOTTOM UP

Exploring the Rights and Agency of Central Asian Displaced Persons in the
World War II Aftermath

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ABSTRACT: In this article special focus is given to the casefiles of Soviet Central Asian nationals as they relate to the Care and Maintenance program under the International Refugee Organization (IRO). While refugees are often portrayed as void of agency or remain invisible, incidentally, these minorities' voices and narratives are underrepresented in history of displacement and refugeedom too. The available records of this small group of refugees or displaced persons (DPs) are helpful in capturing their agency through exploring the ways they were navigating through the process of claiming assistance and protection in their particular circumstances.

KEYWORDS: International Refugee Organization, displaced persons, agency, Central Asia



Introduction

There is plenty of literature on the development history of international refugee protection between 1919-1951, when the first international response and early regime was developed that defined universal norms, principles, and standards for governing the modern refugee regime as well as migration/mobility in general. However, the question about how much refugees themselves were involved in producing, or engaging with, laws, policies, humanitarian responses, and actions has not been thoroughly investigated. In addition, refugees have often been portrayed as passive victims who are dependent on humanitarian assistance. In order to delve into the institutional and social aspects of (forced) human displacement management history and examine question of the agency and image of refugee, I take a closer look at a set of documents related to International Refugee Organization's (IRO) Care and Maintenance program (CM/1 forms) for refugees and displaced persons under its mandate and the screening process of a group of applicants with origins from Central Asia within USSR at that time. While studies based on the CM/1 forms archive have primarily been dedicated to the Jewish and Eastern European nationalities, the displacement experience of Central Asian peoples is a scarcely investigated subject.

At the final stage of the Second World War, governments faced the question of the fate of millions of so-called displaced persons (DPs), who were captured by the Nazis as prisoners of war or labor force from different countries on the territory of Germany and other zones of occupation. Being misfits and de facto stateless in a state-centric world, their rights were limited too. The IRO played a central role in assisting them in the path chosen – returning to the country of origin or starting a new life in a foreign country. Among these displaced persons were about half a million Soviet citizens,¹ formally grouped into one category. As for the Central Asian populations, which also participated and contributed to the Soviet war effort during World War II, it is difficult to say how many of them found themselves in this situation and did not repatriate. At the same time, the USSR did not grant Soviet citizens outside the union's territory the right to emigrate to country of their choice, to flee from potential persecution. On the contrary, the repatriation of its citizens was

¹ See Zemskov, Viktor. N. 2013: "Returnees" and "Non-returnees" (on the fate of Soviet displaced persons in 1944-1956). Proceedings of the Samara Scientific Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 15 (1-1), 103-113.

mandatory and forceful as the Soviet authorities used repressive methods in handling the refugees. In this context, some people from the Central Asian region applied for the IRO's assistance choosing the path of emigration.

The main scope of this article is to add a perspective "from below" to the literature on the international refugee regime and human displacement. In this regard, Peter Gartell's concept 'refugeedom' (Gartrell 2017), based on the idea that refugees are not simply passive victims, but rather active agents who negotiate complex legal and social systems in order to secure their safety and well-being, is helpful to explore the agency of refugees in aftermath of World War II. In particular, I focus mainly on the Central Asian displaced persons or refugees and demonstrate how they exercised multiple forms of human agency in the process of negotiation of eligibility for receiving assistance from the IRO for resettlement. Based on the findings, I argue that displaced persons and refugees were not always passive, constantly suffering and brought down by misery as often described. They did make attempts to increase their chances for a successful outcome of the screening and engaged with institutions. Life continued even in limbo – the desire to emigrate was strong, jobs and opportunities were sought, new families were founded.

In the following sections, I will present the source material and the main concepts relevant for the findings. Before shedding some light on the Central Asian minorities in the quest of seeking protection and demanding rights, I will give a legal-political overview of refugeehood, describe the context specific to the applicants' situation and give an overview of the IRO's role in the process.

Source material and theoretical framework

The IRO's first task of registration of individual and family applications for assistance in order to determine their basic eligibility and need for aid from the organization, generated case files under the care and maintenance program for displaced persons living in occupied Germany and other countries. The information found in the Application for IRO Assistance, also referred as CM/1 forms – a five-page questionnaire – which applicants had to fill out, from 1947, in order to receive

support from IRO, is the main source material in this article (Figure 1).² At the end of the IRO program in 1952, some of these historical records were destroyed, the rest were transferred to the International Tracing Service (ITS) in Arolsen, Germany.³

I examine fifty CM/1 case files found on the applicants from Soviet Central Asian Republics, namely Tajik – 1, Uzbek – 10, Kyrgyz – 5, Kazakh – 9, Turkmen – 25.⁴ This is a relatively small number of records available of these Soviet minority nationalities for the examination in the archival holdings. In addition, these numbers reflect only the number of lead applicants and does not include their families. Yet, it is important source material that offer us some insights and patterns, inconsistencies, peculiarities, and commonalities in the files. The documents can also help to bring usually overlooked actors such as the eligibility officers and refugee applicants and their families to the fore.

My analytical approach is mainly based on the historian Peter Gatrell's concept of "refugeedom" that points to the importance of exploring the agency of refugees and DPs as it's often missing in the historiography. Refugeedom is defined as a broad matrix of relations and practices that include "categorical practices, legal frameworks, bureaucratic instruments and humanitarian relief work, whilst enabling us to relate refugees' experiences, conduct and responses to those prevailing institutions and norms" (Gatrell 2017: 179). Therefore, their agency may be an important factor in understanding their experiences and the policies that affect them. The concept encourages a multidisciplinary approach bringing the parts together in order to understand the whole. Therefore,

² The information on the forms includes personal data, family information, movement and employment over the previous 10–12 years, education and language skills, financial resources, and future plans, reasons contra repatriation, and desired emigration country. This form was filled only after the preliminary check by *registrars*, then *eligibility officers* conducted interviews based on the CM/1 forms. We can find their notes, decisions on screenings, as well as different stamps and abbreviations. The applicants could also submit supplementary sheets on dependents, and different documents. In addition, they had a right to object and have their status re-examined. In addition, Holborn's book on the history of the IRO contains valuable statistical data related to displaced persons and the organization and structure of the Organization itself.

³ See the General Inventory for an extensive overview of the holdings: <<https://www.itsarolsen.org/en/archives/overview-of-the-archival-holdings/general-inventory/>>

The Allies founded the ITS in 1943 for two reasons: to trace the whereabouts of Nazi victims and at the same time to be able to reject claims too (ibid; 10). The ITS re-invented itself as the Arolsen Archives in 2019, one of the world's largest historical archives about Nazi persecution and post-World War II migration.

⁴ These files can be found on <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/en/search> by using nationality filter option.

by analyzing different dimensions of refugeedom, Gatrell argues that we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of refugees and the challenges they face.

This perspective helps us to look at history from below – how people engaged with norms, rules, and what sense they made of their situation given their status. Special attention is paid to the so-called negotiation cases in the aftermath of the Second World War between IRO officers and refugees along with a broader discussion of status and rights, international refugee protection, within the years of early development of refugee regime that culminated in 1951 Refugee Convention.

It is worth noting that a broad understanding of agency is applied in this article, seen both as intentional and unintentional, and not in isolation, to be able to “think systematically about all persons involved in the IRO’s care-and-maintenance project instead of focusing too exclusively on DPs and refugees” (Huhn 2021: 11). Furthermore, historian Henning Borggräfe (2020: 8) explains that “applicants’ statements in DP records cannot simply be read as expressions of their identities and beliefs, or as authentic accounts on their previous lives. Rather, the CM/1 (Care and Maintenance) forms have to be understood as two unequal partners negotiating a status.” The negotiation concept encourages us to focus on more than just biographical info, but also on the conduct and response of refugees to institutions and norms. It is easy to fall into the trap of the primacy of individuals and isolate them despite the point being to include them. In this light, it is also important to describe how state and international institutions interacted with stateless refugees.

Individuals living in limbo find themselves in political and legal vacuum. One Russian refugee even rejected the refugee category: “we are living people [with] the misfortune to have been displaced, but we are human beings all the same. We long to become people once again” (Gatrell 2013: 50). Hannah Arendt (1962: 296–97) has also noted that “without citizenship, in the world of States, a man can be denied those human rights that are in fact tied to citizenship”. Based on Arendt’s ideas in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Alison Kesby (2012) observes that we live in a world where the removal of citizenship negates our rights, sense of belongingness and identity.

In this regard, it would not be wrong to interpret negotiations of eligibility as a negotiation to have rights. Undoubtedly, refugeedom is linked to human dignity, right to nationality or citizenship and

asylum, and many other rights such as freedom of movement, expression, and well-being. Since eligibility was a first step in obtaining a long-term status that enabled refugees to start anew as well as get legal and political protection, the question of refugee agency, and the image of the refugee, needs to be reimagined with the recognition of their resilience, capacities, and their critical role in shaping their own lives and of their communities.

The image shows two pages of an IRO application form. The left page is the main application form, and the right page is a continuation with photographs and a list of documents.

Page 1: Application Form

- Form No. CM/1 (Revised)**
- INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE ORGANIZATION HEADQUARTERS GENEVA**
- APPLICATION FOR IRO ASSISTANCE** (Bitte um IRO-Unterstützung)
- 1. Family Name:** Muratogly (German-wife)
- 2. Other spellings or aliases:** (None listed)
- 3. Religion:** Roman Catholic (checked)
- 4. Date of Completion of Form CM/1:** 9.12.49
- 5. Country of Citizenship:** USSR (checked)
- 6. (b) Country of last habitual residence:** Germany
- 7. Marital Status:** Married (checked)
- 8. Names of all members of family living together:**
 - (a) Man (Mann): Muratogly, Josef, 30.1.28, USSR, Regensburg, Bavaria
 - (b) Woman (first name and maiden name): Frau (Vormann und Mädchennamen) - none listed
 - (c) Children: first name (and last name if different from family name)
 - (i) Tochter (daughter), 20.9.49, USSR, Regensburg, Bavaria

Page 2: Financial resources and Documents

- 14. Financial resources:** Includes two photographs of a woman and a man. A stamp reads "MANDATE CERTIFICATE ISSUED ON 17 JAN 1951".
- 15. Relatives:**

Full name	Relationship	Complete address
Wagen	Father	Neuhausen am Rheinfall, Rheingoldstr. 36, Switzer Land
- 16. Assistance:**
 - 1. Have you or any member of your family been receiving assistance from UNRRA? yes no
 - 2. If you have been receiving assistance, please give the number of months
 - 3. If you have received cash, please state the amount
 - 4. If you have been receiving assistance from a Voluntary Agency, please give the name of the Agency
- 17. Documents:**

For whom	Date	Type	Place of issue	By whom
	8.12	Identity card	Bielefeld/Germany	Police
	1947	Identity card	Bielefeld/Germany	Police
	27.3.1947	Labour card	"	Labour office
	10.2.1947	Stendampass	Neuhuppen by Berlin	Police
	15.10.1945	D.P. Index card	Camp - Bielefeld	By the Chief
	23. Sept 47	Work certificate	Berlin/Germany	Municipal Hospital
	28.7.48	cash	Bielefeld	"
	17.8.48		Bielefeld	Office of State

Figure 1. Personal files of MURATOGLY, JOSEF and MUBARRACK, SABIR.

Overview of early international refugee law and policy

The need for protection and the non-refoulement principle⁵ were especially important developments in the World War Second aftermath, because “the insistence on individual persecution as the chief criterion for recognition represented a significant departure in legal practice,

⁵ International law principle of not forcing refugees/asylum-seekers to return to a country in which they are at risk of being subjected to persecution.

and an indication that human rights were beginning to make an appearance in international law” (Metzger 2017: 116). However, even though the belief in the fundamental worth and dignity of all human life was, as Claudena Skran (1995) writes, one of the foundational grounds for a unified international response and joint efforts, the refugee crises were mistakenly thought of as a temporary, humanitarian question. What started as a humanitarian project always had economic, political social, legal implications (Skran 1995; Frank and Reinisch 2014). Likewise, refugees were framed as either a threat, a financial economic burden, aliens, or an object of pity and embodiment of suffering. This framing had a long-lasting effect as even at present “rarely are refugees perceived as agents, actors, participants, or in general subjects capable of making claims and demanding rights” (Nyers 2008: 164).

Prior to the Second World War, intergovernmental efforts within the framework of the activities of the League of Nations were focused on improving the legal status of refugees by concluding multilateral treaties for specific groups of refugees as they emerged. Gradually, an understanding began to form that a state is an oppressor and protector in one as the 1933 Convention relating to the International Status of Refugees had “an important addition about the explicit obligation of states not to expel authorized refugees, and to avoid refoulement” (Hathaway 2005: 87). Not only did a stateless status imply loss of political and legal protection, but also constituted a traumatic and disruptive experience that had long-lasting effects on person’s life and well-being.

Depoliticizing the question had adverse consequences, especially when in practice it was nothing but political. In practice, states demonstrated unwillingness to take responsibility when it was not in their interests. The definition of ‘refugee’ also corresponded to the needs of nation states and a lot of limitations were set in immigration policies. There were novelties introduced in the categorization of refugees, e.g. the term “displaced person” became a category distinct from that of refugee (Razz and Tames 2020: 3). At the beginning of the relief efforts, repatriation was the preferred solution. It affected how the categories, definitions, norms, and practices were introduced between 1943 and 1951:

[T]he invention of “displaced persons” thus also represented the production of difference with regard to the already established term refugee and its implications: refugees might have to be resettled; displaced persons were to go home (ibid).

The concept of “refugee” has undergone changes over time and the establishment of the 1951 Convention was preceded by a long process of defining two important components – refugee and the non-refoulement principle. When in 1947 more than a million stayed in Europe, still resisting repatriation, the definition of refugee was extended in favor of displaced people also based on human rights principles, since “that group of political dissidents who were neither fascist nor war criminals should not be forced to return because of their right to asylum, which was an essential part of basic rights embodied in the charter of the UN” (Holborn 1956: 32).

In the post-World War II setting the notion of persecution along with non-refoulement were used as a guiding principle in international responses to violence-induced mass displacement. Albeit, there is always a tension between the national and international dimensions of refugee crisis management. Nevertheless, in the long history of confrontation of rights and freedoms advocates and power holders, finally, the birth of international human rights protection regime was prompted. Seemingly, world politicians were willing to adhere to human rights principles as the geopolitical tension was building between two different blocs. However, from the bottom-up perspective, the resistance of a big number of non-returners also laid the foundation for protection being extended to those who did not want to return for well-founded fear of persecution. When international legal and political protection was not sufficient, refugees had tried to pave their way for improving their situation. This agency needs to be historicized.

The motherland calls

The historic setting in which refugees and DPs were repatriated and emigrated is important for our understanding of how Soviet refugees’ repatriation and emigration unfolded. It sheds light on what kind of fate awaited repatriated DPs and the attitude the Soviet Union had with regard to the IRO’s resettlement work. The Western powers initially agreed with the USSR's demands for the repatriation of Soviet citizens, as they did not expect that many of those who did not want to return would be persecuted (Fitzpatrick 2018: 327). Thus, most citizens of the Soviet Union, and Eastern

European states too, did not receive even limited protection at first. Later, the case of non-repatriable DPs and refugees had become evident due to the number of people who under no circumstances were willing to or could return.

As the displacement crisis was more tangible than ever – this required a “new and comprehensive”, “international”, “civilian” type of organization with an integrated approach to work. Thus, “one and half million people [who] refused to return” became the IRO’s big responsibility. The UN General Council decided to provide care for those who did not wish to return to their countries and widened the authority of United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), the predecessor of IRO, to assist persecuted persons and to supervise the case of DPs even without the consent of the country of origin (Holborn 1956: 23). At the time of the IRO’s resettlement program, “Soviet officials condemned the IRO as an ‘employment agency’ enabling ‘the West to enrich itself by resettling the so-called refugees to the countries making the highest bid for their labor’” (Gatrell 2013: 109). With the beginning of the Cold War, the fate of these people also became one of the key elements of growing political confrontations and sharp disputes in the UN between the USSR and the Western powers.

The IRO was operating in this context, and even back then, the information about the sad fate of former POWs and displaced persons who returned to the Soviet Union began to penetrate the borders of the USSR, overcoming prohibitions and the veil of secrecy. Historian, Sheila Fitzpatrick, writes that “far from preventing the formation of a new emigration, Soviet repatriation efforts had actually contributed to its strong anti-Soviet orientation” (ibid.:349). The Motherland called – but few answered, despite intense efforts to “welcome” back the non-returnees.

The return was associated with unsafety and danger, few positive prospects awaited people who Soviet officials somehow thought were “helping” Nazis by being former forced laborers or war prisoners. My own great-grandfather, Saparbay, was subjected to slave labour as a war prisoner for several years in Germany. After liberation, he returned to Kyrgyz SSR to reunite with his beloved wife and children. However, he was interrogated by the NKVD on a regular basis, and even tortured on some occasions. The subject of interrogation of my great-grandfather was mainly about why he did not end his life and kept on living in the hands of enemies. It had quite a toll on his physical

and mental well-being and he passed away in 1955. He did not live to see the moment when, decades later, in 1995, prisoners of war were recognized not only as participants in the war, but also as victims of Nazism. The experience of captivity made them second-class citizens and often hindered them from getting better jobs or enjoying political and civil rights.⁶ Therefore, in order to avoid condemnation and stigmatization, they were forced to remain silent about it, conceal it, because it was shameful and inconvenient to talk about.⁷ Though the need for labor for post-war reconstruction was a mitigating factor, reducing sentences and amnesties, it was widely known that those who survived after being captured were seen as enemies, traitors, or cowards.

Very little is known about Central Asian non-returnees' experience. Yet, despite the limited information found in the personal files coming from the specific interaction between IRO and applicants seeking for international assistance for emigration, they were presumably seeking to escape the less hopeful fate of their Soviet compatriots.

General information on the selected case files

The IRO constitution set out the eligibility criteria and defined refugees as:

(a) victims of the Nazi or fascist regimes or of regimes which took part on their side in the second world war, or of the quisling or similar regimes which assisted them against the United Nations, whether enjoying international status as refugees or not; (b) Spanish Republicans and other victims of the Falangist regime in Spain, whether enjoying international status as refugees or not; (c) persons who were considered refugees before the outbreak of the second world war, for reasons of race, religion, nationality or political opinion.' And it defined Displaced Persons as: 'a person who, as a result of the actions of the authorities of the regimes [...] has been deported from, or has been obliged to leave his country of

⁶ For more details see, for example, Adler, Nanci 1999. "Life in the 'Big Zone': The Fate of Returnees in the Aftermath of Stalinist Repression." *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 5–19.

⁷ See, for example Polyak, Pavel 2016. " Sovetskiye voyennoplennyye: skol'ko ikh bylo i skol'ko vernulos'? [Soviet prisoners of war: how many were there and how many returned?]" *Demograficheskoye obozreniye*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 43-68; Toguzbaev, Kazis. 30 April 2017. "Obrechennyye na molchaniye. Istoriya sem'i byvshego voyennoplennogo". *Radio Azattyk*. At <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/istoria-semyi-byvshego-voennoplennogo/28823206.html>

nationality or of former habitual residence, such as persons who were compelled to undertake forced labor or who were deported for racial, religious or political reasons.⁸

In addition to the Constitution, a more than 200-page long 'Manual for Eligibility Officers', containing the information on where refugees might be coming from, movement trajectories, and guidelines on specific countries and regions,⁹ served as an extensive guide to be followed. The determination of eligibility proceeded in three stages: belongingness to any category envisaged in the Constitution or a new category established by General Council; disqualification stage; and lastly, to provide 'valid objections' to returning - at this stage a person would be recognized as a political dissident and would acquire status as a political refugee (Holborn 1956: 204-5). If the background checks were positive and the criteria were met, comprehensive survey using the CM/1 form completed, eligibility officers would then decide whether the applicants would be included in the IRO's Care and Maintenance program and what the scope of support should be.

The applicants originating from the Soviet Central Asian Republics were mostly young males in their twenties, often deported and taken to work by force, except for few war prisoners, pre-war refugees, and a couple of victims of political repression. Holborn would probably put them under the 3rd category of postwar refugees, or so-called neo-refugees, "comprised of persons who preferred liberty at any price to living in a country under a Communist regime" (1956: 100).

As for the reasons not to repatriate, the most common motive stated was political, then religious. Three brave souls explicitly stated "because of the communist regime", one also "dislike[d] the undemocratic regime of his country", while another one stated "I am alone and have no family". Answering the question of what the reason for emigrating to a country of choice was, most of the applicants stated "democracy" and a few pragmatic persons wrote "for employment". The majority of applicants were recognized as eligible and received different statuses depending on their situation. A couple of Nansenites and some others were given refugee status, the rest were attributed to

⁸ United Nations, *Constitution of the International Refugee Organization*, 15 December 1946, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 18, p. 3.

⁹ Manual for Eligibility Officers / International Refugee Organization (IRO) No. 185, Genf : IRO.

displaced persons, and only one person received legal and political protection (LPP) status. Based on the available records, no one was repatriated and almost everyone was eligible for resettlement.

In fact, the majority of Soviet DPs were repatriated whether voluntarily or forcedly. Overall, the post-war period in Soviet Central Asian Republics was marked by a strong emphasis on rapid industrialization and agricultural development – a continuance of Soviet-style modernization marked by a new wave of repressions, the victims of which were former prisoners of war and even participants in the GPW, representatives of the intelligentsia and artists (Alymkulov 2004: 38-39). Eventually, many of the returnees were persecuted by the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs NKVD, and forced to endure condemnation, sometimes even their families rejected them because of the unwillingness to be associated. In particular, prisoners of war had bigger prospects to experience the worst of the repressive policies upon return (Voronovich & Samatiya 2004), but possibly that also increased their chances to receive the IRO's support. The infamous act No. 270, signed by Stalin in 1941, declared that Red Army soldiers who surrendered or were captured by German forces were to be considered traitors to the Soviet Union and subject to severe punishment, including imprisonment in Gulag labor camps or even execution. For example, according to Kazakh historians, many of the twenty-five thousand Kazakh returnees in 1947 received long sentences in prisons or experienced two camp systems - first Nazi and then Soviet (Belyakov 2017).

About 10 applicants out of 50 had previously received support from the UNRRA or other institutions, and thus had some experience dealing with relief and aid organization and had undergone screening before. The choice of destination places was diverse. Turkey was the most popular destinations, followed by the US and Argentina. No one wanted to stay in Germany, but after employment, marriage or due to a “mass transfer of residual cases to German economy” some stayed for a local settlement, which, according to Holborn, was a ‘last resort’ solution due to overpopulation and the economic situation (ibid.: 338).

Passing the screening, most of the applicants possessed the Certificate of IRO Eligibility. This version of the document was usually issued to the beneficiaries outside of DP camps, to the so called ‘free living/moving’ outside of camps. According to the Arolsen archive e-guide, it was created by the IRO Control Centers and this enabled DPs to prove that their “status had been reviewed in the

context of the IRO's Care and Maintenance program and that they had fulfilled the necessary conditions to be recognized as DPs".¹⁰ That means among the fifty applicants a smaller part of applicants had experienced camp life. 'Free living' individuals generally had more control over their life, living independently and being less imposed to the stricter rules in camps. Though this certification did not replace an identity document, it "became increasingly important under the conditions prevailing during the life of the organization" (ibid.: 313) and was a prerequisite for receiving benefits and simplified issuance of travel or work documents, residence permits, and overall rights enjoyment in general.

Social encounter

The CM/1 forms can be seen as an international and multilingual interaction platform for people of diverse backgrounds. Both sides searched for common ground in the negotiating process. The personnel of the IRO as of 1949, according to statistics counted only 2 from Turkey, 2 from USSR, and 15 stateless, out of a total of 2571 (Holborn 1956: 100). Accordingly, there were language and cultural barriers, as the Organization's staff had no prior knowledge of the Central Asian region. The applications are messy in the parts about language and nationality/citizenship, name spelling – those who were helping to fill in the forms were apparently struggling with the task. Though language barriers from time to time made it difficult to capture how the applicants defined themselves, there are some cases where applicants specifically asked for corrections in the nationality or name spelling.

As mentioned earlier, the CM/1 form offered people an opportunity to describe their own path and to define themselves. Muratoglu, Josef used this opportunity to reclaim the original version of his name.¹¹ The officer tried his best in understanding what constituted the name of the applicant – taking note that Muratoglu could be understood as Muratson, while Muratovich was his patronymic in the Russified version of his name. However, Josef decided to reject the Russified version of his name credentials and identify himself using the original ethnic form. The process of Russification

¹⁰ For a detailed description of the individual administrative documents that AEF, UNRRA and IRO produced to register DPs and refugees and clarify their claims for assistance, see Arolsen Archives: e-Guide <https://eguide.arolsen-archives.org/en/archive/details/certificate-of-iro-eligibility/>

¹¹ <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/en/document/79509172>

of onomastic systems in Central Asia during the Soviet era was a part of the broader effort to promote Russian language and culture as the dominant culture in the Soviet Union. This included the adoption of Russian-style personal names, such as the use of a three-component system of family name, given name, and patronymic, and the addition of Russian suffixes like *-ov* and *-yev* to family names (Azhniuk 2011; 257).

The officers were also having a hard time with Turkmenistani applicants from time to time. It was a good opportunity for the Organization's employees to learn about who Turk people were. There was a remark in one form saying: "Turkish (but not from Turkey!)" or another description for a 'Turkish but not from Turkey' person – "non-Turkish speaking Moslem". Inconsistent self-identifications among applicants were not helpful either.

Moreover, the applicants did not always fill out their application forms themselves, especially if the applicant did not know the language. We can also find notes on the forms, where we get a glimpse into the officers' thoughts and expressions of doubts, opinions, sometimes conversation with other officers, description of an applicant. The following examples are related to the cases of the benefit of doubt, when some applicants would be characterized as "simple", "makes a good impression" or "the story seems to be believable", "man is too simple and too young to be a collaborator" - these kinds of descriptions are often used by IRO officers. Along with "simple" the phrase "primitive 'Kirgis' man" was once used, perhaps to describe an indigenous person, which hints at "underdeveloped" or "uncivilized" labels. As if the Kyrgyz nationality was completely unfamiliar to the officer; though in the Eligibility Manual, it is mentioned under the USSR nationalities list. We may speculate that they were perceived as simple due to lack of higher education or due to humble backgrounds. Overall, it seems that appearing 'simple' was beneficial for an applicant's success, especially for the ones who did not have any documents for their stories to be believable.

"All the time calls himself Turk(e)"

The "I am Turk(e)"-argument was one of the most repeated narratives used by the applicants during the screening process, especially by Turkestani, as if it was somehow considered helpful to negotiate with the IRO's Eligibility Officers over assistance. There is little doubt these people were among

the refugees who resisted returning and were ready to follow a certain narrative if it would save them. To illustrate, one of the cases revealed how Abdulla Turdukul, an Uzbek from Uzbek USSR, asserted that “his place of birth and citizenship entered in the ‘Kennkarte’¹² [were] wrong, because he was afraid to tell the truth from fear to be compulsory repatriated to USSR”, it is unknown which country he claimed to be from, later he stated his true birthplace in the IRO application and received the assistance.¹³ Prior to 1946, repatriation was considered as a natural solution as it was the easiest way to solve the problem of uprooted people, so it will not be wrong to say that some of refugees and DPs like Abdulla were trying to avoid repatriation at all costs way before the IRO started its work.

While we may assume the applicants were in most cases aware of assistance being extended to DPs who were unwilling to return and included under the IRO mandate, it did not stop people from being flexible in negotiating their national identity. For example, a person would write that their nationality was Kirgiz, but kept telling the officers he was a Turk.¹⁴ Most likely for the same reasons as in the first example for passing the screening. There was a lot of inconsistencies in self-identification and nationality of the applicants. A person could be a Nansenite, “USSR”, Kazakh, and Turk – all in one within a single application. The E-guide on document explanation says:

the first CM/1 applications distributed by IRO employees had a field for applicants to write their citizenship. However, it soon became clear that the question of citizenship was not so easy to answer. The revised CM/1 forms used from 1948 onward therefore distinguished between country of citizenship, country of last habitual residence prior to displacement, ethnic or national group, and whether the applicant had a Nansen passport (meaning they were stateless). In field 6(a), the applicants additionally had to mark whether they had claimed the citizenship, it had been officially established, it was a former citizenship or it was only presumed.¹⁵

¹² The basic identity document in use inside Germany (including occupied incorporated territories) during the Third Reich era. DBpedia. ”Kennkarte”. Dbpedia. <https://dbpedia.org/page/Kennkarte>

¹³ CM1-File Abdulla Turdukul, 3.2.1.1 / 79847671 /ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.

¹⁴ CM1-File Tölek Nisenalioglu, 3.2.1.1 / 79531399 /ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.

¹⁵ CM/1 application. E-guide. Arolsen Archives. <https://eguide.arolsen-archives.org/en/archive/details/cm1-application/>

Territorial borders in the Central Asian region were also somewhat blurred. And it is plausible that applications were designed in a way that allowed some space for self-expression in terms of nationality and religion (Borggräfe 2020: 6). Nevertheless, these two factors only added to the confusion; crossings by hand and corrections are proof of that, though it is unlikely that these people were having a genuine identity crisis for most of the cases. Messy nationality/citizenship section can be attributed to the officers too, as many of the applicants were not proficient in German and even Russian, especially in writing. Little to no knowledge about the region on the part of IRO were beneficial for presenting an ambiguous ethnic identity for the applicants.

Agayakov Tolögon¹⁶ of Kyrgyz nationality born in Tyanshan even managed to be eligible for “repatriation” to “his” country of origin – Turkey – being neither Turkish nor born in Turkey. In this case it does not seem to be done on purpose by the applicant, but an indication of how little the IRO staff knew about people populating the Central Asian region. The first time he applied, he was recognized as a refugee and all the data was correct, but during the re-screening he became a Turk/Turkish and this time was identified as someone ‘not within the mandate’. His knowledge of German was limited and most likely the officers were helping to fill in the form. Afterwards, the situation was clarified. Interestingly, his first desired destination was Argentina, which changed to Turkey to where he emigrated.

There are other examples of self-identifications known such as “the impressive act of collective self-definition of thousands of surviving Jews” being “the individual strategies of adaptation to the registration procedure” (ibid.: 19). They claimed a Jewish nationality, which was not officially recognized by the Allied powers at the time. However, as the scale of the Jewish refugee crisis became more apparent, the Allies established Jewish DP camps, which provided them with their own space and allowed them to organize their own communities. Self-representation carried political significance (Banko et al 2022; 9) as strategies used by applicants could influence the IRO registration procedures, and consequently, resettlement programs.

¹⁶ CM1-File Agayakov Tolögon, 3.2.1.1 / 79847671 /ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.

According to IRO's resettlement policy it was extremely important to find an environment for refugees with similar culture or one they could integrate easily into (Holborn 1956: 388). No appropriate resettlement scheme existed for Moslem refugees and DPs until an agreement was concluded between the IRO and Turkey in 1948 (ibid.). It also applied to the examined list of the Soviet Union applicants, as most of them could be considered Moslems. Holborn shares that the Soviet government disapproved of the entry into Turkey of such refugees that brought some difficulties during the preliminary documentation of the Moslems born in Soviet territory. So, their "eagerness to be accepted by the Turkish selection mission and fear of being rejected because of their birth-place caused some of them to false their claims and statements and allege that they were of Turkish origin" (ibid.). These considerations also could explain why the "I am a Turk" narrative was often used by the Soviet Central Asian applicants.

Although the USSR citizens were formally united in one category, they were people not only of different ethnic and social origins, but of different political views, languages, and cultures too. Besides an active machinery of totalitarianism, Central Asian people were going through processes of Sovietization, and the soviet policy of indigenization did not favor markers of 'otherness', such as local cultural traits, and especially different religions. The majority of applicants identified as Muslims, which could explain the often-desired destination – Turkey. One Kyrgyz former prisoner of war, Sydyk, who like other Soviet prisoners of war heard, already in 1943, what would happen to "traitors to the motherland" and understood what awaited him and others on the other side of the front.¹⁷ In 1945, after the victory, he met his German wife at the hospital. He decided not to return and emigrated to Turkey explaining his choice by his Muslim religion. Later he settled in the US by help of another non-returnee, Azamat, who left with the Allies and settled in the United States after captivity and tried as best he could to help surviving fellows with the same tragic fate. These are very rare accounts of people who managed to escape, but they also tell us that people emigrated using alternative channels before the more favorable rules entered into force. Moreover, it also indicates that some social networks or diasporas could have existed, which could prompt "exchanged

¹⁷ Radio Liberty. 1 April 2019. "Sydyk from Batken. Fate of World War II prisoners of war". *Radio Azattyk*. At <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-esimde-aldashev-nogoibaeva/29853736.html>

knowledge about the opportunities to access aid and support from local, national or international agencies, and about how best to navigate the refugee regime” (Banko et al; 12).

“German wife”

According to the available archival index data, applicants were predominantly male: “83% of the individual applicants and heads were male and only 17% female” (Borggräfe 2020: 56); it also applies to the set of files in concern except one case with a female head applicant. Though, even in that case it seems to be a complicated story entailing reunification and separation of the family.¹⁸ This does not mean, however, that there were no women refugees. They would usually go as family members or spouse dependent on a head of family and chief applicant. There were cases where the Soviet refugees and DPs would get married and often to a woman of German nationality. Sometimes they would get married or have kids in time their case was being processed, which took time, basically starting a family life they did not have before (young and single as most of them were).¹⁹ This in part defies the image of refugees “concerned primarily with their own tragedy” (Holborn 1956: 27) and how uncertainty was handicapping them. In some cases, when applicant was already married, it is possible to learn more about women as they also had to fill in the CM/1 form giving similar information.²⁰

Another gendered aspect was the line "can emigrate together with her husband only" - a big emphasis was made on this requirement. Though it's an understandable limitation for wives of German origin to follow the mandate and not to violate eligibility criteria, it also applied to women who could qualified as refugees on their own, but where the head of family typically was a man and the success of the application depended on the chief applicant. The only safeguard was if the applicant proved to be a refugee or DP but was found ineligible for reasons stated in Part II of the Annex I of the

¹⁸ CM1-File Turin Sliwinska Elisabetht Argoniiv , 3.2.1.1 / 916340 /ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.

¹⁹ It was reflected in the IRO status change documents attached to the application.

²⁰ For example, Israel Hasanow met his future wife, Emka-Mule Irmgard, of Austrian nationality in Bamberg when appealing for assistance after both got liberated. Prior to that she was a jail prisoner after getting arrested by gestapo and he was a forced laborer at farm. <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/de/document/79167561>

Constitution (for example, being war criminals). In such cases the rest of the family could still be assisted.²¹

In another case an applicant stated as a reason for not to be repatriated, the fact that he had a German wife, as this would be seen in a bad light in the USSR.²² Stalin, indeed, banned marriages with foreigners in the USSR with the issuance of the 1947 Decree "On the prohibition of marriages between citizens of the USSR and foreigners", which was cancelled only in 1953.²³ In other words, the applicant's concern was exceedingly valid. There were at least two cases in which being married to a German was explicitly stated as an amplifying factor for eligibility.

Another way to look at marriage to a DP or refugee is to suggest that women too were trying to navigate "the legalities and politics of refugee status and immigration" (Balint 2021). Could it be another strategy as a way for German women to receive assistance and/or to emigrate with the indirect assistance of the IRO? There is no evidence found in the examined files; however, the notion of "political" persecution and historical DP narratives in general were male-centric assuming that women were apolitical: for them "gaining legitimacy on their own terms was already severely limited by the definition of what constituted persecution and for their relegation to the domestic sphere as dependents" (ibid.; 75-6).

IRO's narrative

The IRO had to balance between their mandated purpose and policies of receiving states. As an international organization operating in 25 countries all over the world, it surely did contribute to the spread of the idea of non-refoulement. At the same time, receiving countries were reluctant to grant asylum. On one side, the IRO with its emigration care and maintenance program, which was specifically designed to help build the skills, provided healthcare, counselling and so on in order to prepare refugees and DPs for easier resettlement (Holborn 1956: 2) and also correspond to the desired profile, - "a young, single, healthy male workers who would help the country's economy,

²¹ Holborn, "IRO", Eligibility Chapter.

²² CM1-File Muratoglu Erna, 3.2.1.1 / 79509172/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/en/document/79509172>

²³ Politburo resolution "On the prohibition of marriages between Soviet citizens and foreigners," February 15, 1947, in Stalin i kozmopolitizm: Dokumenty agitpropa TsK KPSS, 1945–1953 (Moscow, 2005), 107–8.

but would not be a burden on it” (Borggräfe 2020: 18), - to facilitate the process. While it is important to keep in mind that the IRO was in a position of power in relation to refugees and DPs, as a temporary international organization designed for the specific project, the organization was not more powerful than all states together. There was a limit to what it could do. Nation-states still defined who belonged and who did not, how many people and what kinds of persons could enter country for settlement. For instance, Ahmetcan Omerhan was either supposed to go to France or be returned from France, because he was rejected due to the absence of desired job opportunities (in agriculture). In any case, under the IRO’s assistance he later completed some courses, got recommendations, and tried his chances with Pakistan as a history teacher.²⁴

Based on the set of documents examined (and the rare health reports included), it appears that health condition (having missing limbs, terminal diseases; being “unfit for heavy physical work”, or “bedridden”) was not a disqualifying factor. Moreover, they were sent to their desired destination (at least in two cases they were known to be sent to the US with more expensive oversea transfer). Hospitals in Germany were in a very bad condition (Holborn 1956: 205), and, certainly, better health facilities or rehabilitation programs were necessary for those beneficiaries. This fragmentary example does not show the whole picture and it is necessary to always question how the IRO was balancing between raising its beneficiaries’ chances of being qualified for a new life and appealing to or influencing the attitudes of the receiving countries. And, most importantly, how it affected the negotiation process.

Conclusion

The available records in the Arolsen archives depict how Central Asians, who chose to live free from fear and persecution by refusing to be repatriated, and risk to leave behind their previous lives for a chance to have a new beginning, were expressing their agency in negotiating their future in different ways. For them, receiving a certificate of IRO eligibility was the first stage for acquiring a citizenship status in the future, which often implied an access to the other rights and opportunities, and becoming ‘humans’ again. In the end, one of the reasons why non-refoulement emerged as a norm

²⁴ <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/de/document/79547637>

was because “the last million” resisted repatriation after the end of the war– it was a collective response to rules and policies that did not recognize their fundamental rights.

This group of applicants were small in number and likely they had fewer nationalist sentiments in comparison to the larger refugee nation groups. Rather they could be seen simply as political refugees for whom any other country where there would be no persecution and opportunities to build a new life was a good destination. The findings also reflect a desire among people in the region to reclaim their cultural heritage and assert their own identities. Likewise, the cases of strategic national identity narratives or concealing information, presenting either a specific or ambiguous image, can be seen as an expression of refugees’ and DPs’ agency. There is a gender aspect in the application processing too – the process was male-centered placing women in a disadvantageous position in claiming rights. These negotiations also tell us something about the social encounter not just of an international institution/state with a stateless person of ethnic minority, but also somewhat of different cultures – western and non-western.

The fear was genuine, and prospects of persecution were real: negative attitudes towards prisoners of war and captivity experience on its own, lack of opportunities at home, fear for their newfound families. Those who had families back home had to make a very difficult decision and not be in touch or contact anyone for their own sake. They were also people of different backgrounds; ordinary people whose lives were altered by the forces outside of their control. They continued to adapt to the new life circumstances – one of the applicants was a camp leader, some worked during and after the war, led independent lives, learned new languages and skills. They were engaged in local economies; even though involuntarily, they moved around different places like Poland, Ukraine, Austria, France. They met different people – sometimes their life partners. While it’s true that their possibilities were limited, and there is also not much information about the war experience or trauma, hardships they had endured, we see that were not completely clueless and passive about negotiating their future.



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