

Memory and Experience among Kalmyk Refugees, 1926-1951

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Introduction

On 28 July 1951, Deputy U.S. Attorney General Peyton Ford decided in favor of two Kalmyk DPs, Dorzha and Samsona Remilev, who had petitioned for permanent residence in the United States on the basis of the claim that they were white. The 1940 U.S. Nationality Act, Section 303, limited the right to naturalization to “white persons, persons of African nativity or descent, and descendants of races indigenous to the Western Hemisphere.”¹ On behalf of the Remilevs, the counsel for the International Refugee Organization (IRO) carried out research on the Kalmyks’ ‘race’, their history, language, and biological origins. Blood tests showed that Dorzha was 75% Kalmyk and Samsona 50% Kalmyk.² This ‘biological proof’ of their non-Asianness was corroborated by a cultural argument that the Kalmyks had been assimilated into European Russian culture by the virtue of having lived in west Russia for more than 300 years, during which time they had intermarried with Russians, learned the language, and sedentarized. Based on these ‘facts’ the Remilevs argued that the Kalmyks should be considered ‘whiter’ than ‘the Afghans, Syrians and non-European Arabs, who have been eligible to naturalization’ in the U.S. (In Exclusion Proceedings, April 20, 1951). The case seesawed through the courts in the first half of 1951, and was eventually decided for the Remilev with Ford’s intervention. In the wake of this decision, Kalmyk DPs--in total, 728 people--were resettled in the United States mainly between December 1951 and February 1952.

The admission of Kalmyks to the United States on a family basis brought to an end the group’s long stay in the Displaced Persons (DP) camps of southern Germany. Following the October Revolution of 1917, many Kalmyks fought on the side of the White Army against the Bolsheviks in the civil war. When the White movement was defeated in western part of Russia in 1920, these Kalmyks fled along with the army’s remnants to Europe, settling in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, France, Belgium, and Holland. World War Two precipitated a second wave of Kalmyk emigration from the Soviet Union when a group of Kalmyks joined the retreating German Army and arrived in Europe. After the war, many Kalmyk refugees in Europe both of the first and second waves of emigration ended up in DP camps in the Allied zone in Western Germany. Branded as ‘traitors’ or ‘monarchists’ by the Soviet authorities, these Kalmyks, especially of the second wave, did not wish to return to the Soviet Union. In 1951 and 1952, following the decision in the Remilev’s case and with the help of the Tolstoy Foundation and the World Church Service, many of them managed to emigrate from Europe to the United States where they settled in compact groups in Philadelphia and Howell township, New Jersey.

This history, painted in broad strokes, is well known. Individual histories, however, varied widely and underscore the diverse set of experiences that Kalmyks had in their journey from the Soviet state through eastern Europe to the camps of postwar Germany and finally to the United States. To do so, we reconstruct Kalmyk experiences of dispossession, war, and displacement in the first half of the 20th century Europe in both temporal and spatial dimensions by analyzing personal narratives offered by Kalmyk DPs in postwar camps. We are particularly interested in the survival strategies deployed by ethnic Kalmyks as they negotiated the DP camp system in the first years after World War II and their attempts at controlling their fate through improving their legal status by telling legible

¹ <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/76th-congress/session-3/c76s3ch876.pdf>

² The Durnbaugh Kalmuk Papers, p. 151. Copy retrieved from the Brethren Historical Library and Archives.

stories. Drawing on records from the International Tracing Service (ITS) held in digital form at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as well as online, we have recorded the experiences of approximately 350 Kalmyks who told their stories to the U.S. Army and International Refugee Organization after the war. These narrative arcs reflect the contingency and uncertainty of lived experiences during and after global war.

Who are the Kalmyks?

The Kalmyks are a historically nomadic population with origins in Dzungaria, today Xinjiang and eastern Kazakhstan. Migrating west during the early 17th century, the Kalmyks settled on the banks of the Volga River. Beginning in the late 17th century, a number of Kalmyks joined Cossack military regiments in the Don region, thus becoming hereditary soldiers.³ In 1771, under the leadership of Ubashi Khan, the majority of Kalmyks embarked on a return journey to their historic homeland.⁴ Those who remained, primarily on the right bank of the Volga River, were further incorporated into Russian imperial structures through a series of legal codifications.⁵

The First Wave (1920-23)

During the Russian Civil War, many Kalmyks supported the old regime and the majority of Kalmyk Cossacks fought under the command of the White Generals Anton Denikin and Pyotr Wrangel. With the defeat of the Whites forces in late 1920, a large group of White Army personnel--including a number of Kalmyks--fled from their last redoubt on the Crimean Peninsula to Istanbul, Turkey. This first wave of emigres were primarily members of the Buzava *ulus*, and common kinship facilitated ingroup unity in the first years of emigration.

According to Milenkovic, this first group of Kalmyks arrived to Serbia in April 1920 from Novorossiysk with Denikin's Army.⁶ The Kalmyk community was replenished by another group that arrived with Wrangel's Army from Crimea in November 1920; yet another group arrived in Yugoslavia in late 1921. According to Adelman, about 2,000 Kalmyks left Russia in 1920, of whom 450 settled in Belgrade and its vicinities.⁷ According to three Kalmyk émigrants, as well as the Kalmyk historians Borisenko and Goryaev, the numbers are different; in November 1920, about 3,000 Kalmyks evacuated from Crimea, of whom around 1,000 went on to Europe.⁸ In the first half of the 1920s, the largest Kalmyk colony was in Yugoslavia. Receiving help from the Russian refugee organizations and various charities, the Kalmyk diaspora sent their children to Russian gymnasium in Belgrade or to the Cadet corps. The diaspora had three organisations: a "Buddhist Spiritual Council" and two communities, namely the Council of Kalmyk Colony (Pravlenie Kalmytskoy Kolonii) and Platovskaya

³ Ochirov, Utash B., *Kalmykia v period Grazhdanskoy voiny (1917-1920)*. Elista: Dzhangar (2006), p. 29; Remileva, Elena, *Oirat-Mongoly. Obzor Istorii Evropeyskikh Kalmykov*. Germany: Bertugan (2010), p. 339-341.

⁴ Khodarkovsky, Michael, *Where two worlds met: the Russian state and the Kalmyk nomads, 1600-1771*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992.

⁵ Ulanov, Mergen S., Badmaev, Valeriy N., and Edward C. Holland, "Buddhism and Kalmyk Secular Law in the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries." *Inner Asia* 19, No. 2 (2017), p. 97-314.

⁶ Milenkovic, Toma. *Kalmici u Srbiji, 1920-1944*. Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1998, p. 21.

⁷ Adelman, Fred. *Kalmyk Cultural Renewal*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania (1960).

⁸ Borisenko I.V. and Goryaev A.T. *Ocherki istorii kalmytskoy emigratsii*. Elista: KIGPI (1998), p. 46. The authors refer to texts by I. Mikhailinov, Badma Ulanov and Sanzi Balykov. Mikhailinov in his short article in journal *Kovylnye Volny* writes that out of 3,000 Kalmyks who left from Crimea, 2,000 returned to Russia. See Mikhailinov I.B., *K Voprosu o pereselenii v Manchuriyu. Kovylnye Volny*, No. 12 (1936), p. 19.

stanitsa, which had a tense relationship due to the disagreements between their leaders⁹. In terms of settlement, Kalmyks settled in Belgrade or in the nearby settlements of Mokri Lug and Karaburma. There were also those who lived elsewhere in Serbia, including the provinces and districts of Paraćin, Banat, Debeljača, Pančevo, Crepaja, Jasenov, Gornji Milanovac, and Knjaževac among others.¹⁰

In 1931 the Yugoslavian Kalmyk colony numbered 300 people. As jobs became scarce many emigrated to France in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The construction of the first Buddhist temple in Belgrade in December 1929 not only invigorated the life of Kalmyks in Serbia but also became a center of Kalmyk religious and cultural life. As such it attracted financial support from the Serbian Ministry of Religion and donations from both individuals and organisations, including the manufacturer Miloš Jaćimović, Princess Helena Karađorđević, the municipality of Belgrade, the US Embassy in Belgrade, and the Kalmyk colonies across Europe.¹¹ The street where the temple stood was named Budistička Street (today Budvanska), which figures in T/USA forms of Kalmyk refugees.

The Second Wave (1942-1945)

The effects of the civil war on Kalmyk lands were devastating, and included widespread famine.¹² In 1920 the Kalmyk territory, which had been part of Astrakhan Gubernia, was given the status of Kalmyk Autonomous Oblast; in 1936 the region was elevated to the status of Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). The Soviets encouraged the sedentarization of the formerly nomadic Kalmyks and launched a campaign against the practice of Buddhist religion among the group beginning in 1929.

The largest movement of Soviet citizens westward during World War II coincided with the German army's retreat from August 1943 and May 1944; more than 10,000 people from the North Caucasus, the Kalmyk steppe, and the Donbas region left the Soviet state with the Germans. The exact numbers of Kalmyks is contested, with estimates ranging from 3,000 to 5,000.¹³ The Kalmyks went west through Ukraine, Romania, and Poland, at times working as *ostarbeiter*¹⁴ during lengthy journeys that lasted up to a year. Others served in the cavalry units of Vlasov's army.¹⁵ Little is precisely known about the experience of this second wave of Kalmyk emigres en route from the Soviet Union to Germany and afterwards, except for some sketchy accounts provided by peoples like Dorzha Arbakov, a member of the Kalmyk Cavalry Corps.¹⁶ However, internal divisions among the emigres

⁹ Sandzhi Rakba Menkov about life of the Kalmyks in Yugoslavia, Kovylnye Volny, Paris, 1931, No. 3.

¹⁰ Milenkovic, *Kalmici u Srbiji*, p. 25.

¹¹ Milenkovic, *Kalmici u Srbiji*, p. 93-114.

¹² Ochirov, *Kalmykia v period Grazhdanskoj voiny (1917-1920)*. pp. 314, 379.

¹³ Adelman provides the former figure, Elliott the latter.

¹⁴ *Ostarbeiter* or 'Eastern worker' is a German term designating foreign slave workers, both civilian and PoW (prisoners of war), from Central and Eastern Europe who were brought to Germany to work in agriculture or industry during World War II. Although Hitler's order of 4 July 1941 allowed Russian prisoners of war to be kept as laborers in the Reich, it prohibited 'Mongolian or Asiatic prisoners' from being sent to Germany (Homze: 1967, p. 67). Despite this, as our analysis of IRO files shows, many Kalmyks worked in German farms and factories due to labour shortage. See Homze, Edward L. *Foreign Labour in Nazi Germany*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (1967).

¹⁵ Andrey Andreyevich Vlasov defected from the Red Army in July 1942 and subsequently led the Russian Liberation Army. On Vlasov, see Andreyev, Catherine, *Vlasov and the Russian liberation movement: Soviet reality and émigré theories*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

¹⁶ Guchinova, Elza-Bair, *Ulitsa "Kalmuk Road: Istorija, Kultura i Identichnosti Kalmytskoj Obschiny Soedinennykh Shtatov Ameriki*. Sankt-Peterburg: Aleteya (2004), p. 76-83. The Kalmyk Cavalry Corps was formed in the fall of 1942 during the Nazi occupation of Kalmykia. Headed by the German Intelligence Officer Dr. Rudolf Otto Doll, the Corps had about

later emerged in the DP camps, as the majority of second wave emigrants were members of the Derbet and Torghut *ulusi*. Unable to reconcile their tribal differences and further distinguished by their experiences in interwar Europe and the Soviet Union, substantial divisions emerged within the Kalmyk DP community. Various revival movements both religious and secular were initiated by different groups but not uniformly accepted by the community as a whole.¹⁷

Inter-tribal differences were also perpetuated among the Kalmyks in the USSR. This can be seen from the structure of the Kalmyk Corps, which was assembled by the German Army during its occupation of Kalmykia in 1942. It consisted of four squadrons divided along tribal affiliations: 1st and 2nd squadrons were recruited from Torghuts, 3rd of Derbets, and 4th of Iki Derbets and Don Kalmyks.¹⁸ This structure, no doubt made on the recommendation of the Kalmyks themselves, shows the relationship among the respective Kalmyk tribes. It is no coincidence that 4th squadron consisted of Buzavas and Iki Derbets, who having lived among the Russians in pre-revolutionary times, were the most Russified among the Kalmyks. The majority of Bag Derbets and Torghuts, who lived together in Astrakhan Territory, by contrast, spoke mainly Kalmyk.

At war's end, the large majority of the estimated 5,000 to 7,000 Kalmyks in Germany and environs were repatriated to the Soviet Union; Zemskov reports this total as 6,405 as of 1 March 1946.¹⁹ This number is very high, given that the total Kalmyk population in Europe could not have been much more than 7,000; in addition to the second wave totals, about 2,000 Kalmyks left the Soviet Union in 1920.²⁰ However, the idea that the majority of the surviving Kalmyks in post-war Europe were repatriated to the Soviet Union is corroborated by the population totals for Kalmyk DPs provided by Adelman, who estimates 250 in the Bavarian DP camps of the U.S. zone in postwar Germany. Similarly, in 1958 the population of the Kalmyk community in the U.S., which was composed of those DPs who were granted asylum by the State Department in 1951, stood at 675.²¹

On 28 December 1943, in the Soviet Union the Kalmyks were deported en masse from the lower Volga to Siberia on the basis of charges of collaboration with the Nazi army during their

5,000 members, including civilians, according to some sources (Elliott 1982: 15; Reinhard, 1972: 86; Hoffmann, 1974; Nekrich, 1978: 77; Guchinova, 2004: 90-91). The Kalmyk Corps was used to cover the retreat of the German Army from Caucasus in January 1943. Later it guarded the German crossing across the Dnieper and railway lines in Dnepropetrovsk oblast in Ukraine. It also fought with Soviet partisans. From April 1944 to January 1945, while located in Lublin, Poland, the Corps engaged in fights with Polish partisans. In July 1944, its commander Otto Doll died during a battle. Following a defeat at the hands of the Red Army in Radom-Kelce area in January 1945, the surviving members of the Corps along with their families fled towards Bavaria. In February 1945, in Neuhamer training camp, while the Corps was being reorganized and replenished by Kalmyks from Italy and Western front (Guchinova, 2004: 103), their family members and other civilians were evacuated to the Bavarian refugee camps. The Corps was sent to Croatia to join colonel Ivan Kononov's 3rd Plastun brigade, which was part of the 15th Cossack Cavalry Corps of General Helmuth von Pannwitz (other sources say that the Kalmyks joined the 606th Cavalry corps). In March 1945 the Kalmyk soldiers became a part of Vlasov's Russian Liberation Army. Towards the end of the war the Corps members surrendered to the British soldiers who handed them over to the Soviet Army. According to Dorzha Arbakov, only a few men managed to escape (Guchinova, 2004: 82.)

¹⁷ Adelman, *Kalmyk Cultural Revival*.

¹⁸ Guchinova, Elza-Bair, *Ulitsa "Kalmuk Road: Istoriya, Kultura i Identichnosti Kalmytskoy Obschiny Soedinennykh Shtatov Ameriki*. Sankt-Peterburg: Aleteya (2004), p. 95.

¹⁹ Zemskov, V.N., 'K Voprosu o Repatriatsii Sovetskikh grazhdan 1944-1951' in *Istoriya SSSR*. 1990, N. 4. Retrieved from <https://www.politpros.com/journal/read/?ID=141&journal=68>.

²⁰ Adelman, *Kalmyk Cultural Renewal*, p. 2.

²¹ Adelman, *Kalmyk Cultural Renewal*, p. 3; The Durnbaugh Kalmuk Papers, p. 158. Copy retrieved from the Brethren Historical Library and Archives.

occupation of Kalmykia in 1942.²² The Kalmyk Autonomous Republic was subsequently abolished and its territory integrated into surrounding regions. The effects of the deportation on Kalmyk culture were manifold; traditions of ancestral worship, customs, and facility in Kalmyk language declined. Even after the group's rehabilitation in 1956, Buddhist practice was proscribed and the first officially sanctioned temple did not open in the republic's capital of Elista until 1988. Given devastating effects of the two world wars on Kalmyk population and culture, questions regarding their ethnic survival and the preservation of religion and culture were of central importance to the Kalmyk diaspora in Europe in the first half of the 20th century and remain relevant to this day to Kalmyk diasporas outside Russia.

Who were the DPs?

In the summer of 1945, some seven million civilians were on the move in Western Europe.²³ Many were Soviet citizens who had been displaced as a result of the conflict. Informal exchanges of Soviet nationals and western Europeans occurred at war's end, and Proudfoot estimates that 20,000 people were transferred in this fashion. A plan on population transfers was formalized between the Soviets and the Americans and British in May 1945, and included conditions about care, feeding, and allowances for repatriates. The legal basis for repatriation hinged on the February 1945 Yalta agreement between the Allied powers, which endorsed the Soviet position that all prisoners of war or displaced persons identified as citizens of the USSR and liberated by Allied forces were to be returned to the Soviet Union "regardless of their individual wishes."²⁴ While the Yalta agreement did not contain any reference to the use of force in the repatriation of Soviet prisoners of war or civilians, in April 1945 the SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force), under General Eisenhower, adopted a principle that acknowledged the use of force during repatriation as legitimate.²⁵ In order to implement the Yalta agreement, in August 1945 both the United States Forces for European Theatre (USFET) and the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) accepted the definition of a "Soviet citizen" as "those who lived within the borders of the Soviet Union before 1 September 1939."²⁶

While the American approach was flexible in that it allowed room for the interpretation and reconsideration of the case if "a person opposes repatriation after being identified as a Soviet citizen by a Soviet repatriation representative," the British approach was less ambiguous and endorsed the position that "if a prisoner of war or displaced person is identified as a Soviet citizen, he will be repatriated regardless of his personal wishes."²⁷ The joint repatriation operation of Soviet citizens carried out by the British and Americans was codenamed 'Keelhaul'. From May to November 1945

²² Statiev writes about the Soviets' decision to deport the Kalmyks that, "The government's case against the Kalmyks was virtually without foundation." Statiev, Alexander, "The Nature of Anti-Soviet Armed Resistance, 1942-44: The North Caucasus, the Kalmyk Autonomous Republic, and Crimea." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 2 (2005): 285-318, p. 306.

²³ Wyman, Mark, *DPs: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-51*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 17.

²⁴ Proudfoot, Malcolm J., *European Refugees: 1939-1952. A Study in Forced Population Movement*. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1956, p. 216.

²⁵ Epstein, Julius, *Operation Keelhaul. The Story of Forced Repatriation from 1944 to the Present*. Old Greenwich: The Devin-Adair Company, 1973, p. 23-26; 46-51.

²⁶ Proudfoot, *European Refugees*, pp. 215-216. The author refers to 2 orders, namely (1) the order of the *United States Forces European Theatre (USFET) MAIN S-16517 of 9 August to USFA and 3 U.S. and 7 U.S. Armies*, and (2) the order of the *British Army of the Rhine/16032/B/MG8/(a), 30 August 1945, to Headquarters, 1,8, and 30 Corps Districts on the Repatriation of Soviet citizens*. See also Mark R. Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta: Soviet Refugees and America's Role in Their Repatriation*. Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1982, p. 86 and Proudfoot, *European Refugees*, p. 80.

²⁷ Proudfoot, *European Refugees*, p. 216.

alone, a total of 2,272,000 Soviet citizens in the Allied zone were handed over by American and British soldiers to Soviet authorities.²⁸ During the first days of Operation 'Keelhaul' in June 1945, British soldiers forcibly repatriated 35,000 individuals including Soviet citizens and pre-World War II emigres, mainly Cossacks and White Russian generals and officers, from Lienz and Judenburg, Austria.²⁹ Repatriation was also carried out on American soil: about 4,000 Soviet prisoners of war and Vlasovites were repatriated from these areas.³⁰

Subjected to discrimination and mass purges by the Stalinist regime in their homeland, the USSR's national minorities in Europe--such as Latvians, Estonians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians--were repatriated in 'disproportionately large numbers' and felt especially vulnerable.³¹ This historical fear was exacerbated by the fact that western and southern part of the USSR, where many of them lived, had been occupied by the German Army during the war, which made its inhabitants subject to accusations of 'treachery' or 'collaboration with the Nazis.' In Europe, the majority of these individuals from minority backgrounds--prisoners of war, forced laborers and those who came with the German Army--rightfully feared of severe punishment at the hands of the Soviets.

As the Soviet-American relations deteriorated, on 20 December 1945 the American State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee decided that repatriation of the Soviet civilians was not mandatory, which came after the ban on the use force in repatriating military collaborators and ex-prisoners of war on 4 September 1945.³² With the onset of tensions between the Soviets and the west--and because most Soviet citizens had already been returned--the number of repatriates began to fall from the beginning of 1946. However, DPs were constantly afraid of repatriation. Wyman writes that "[repatriation] kept rising to the surface just when DP life seemed to be improving, tearing at the facade of cheerful camp existence, a continuing source of fear and tension."³³ In extreme cases, these fears led to suicides and escape attempts from the camps.³⁴

Kalmyk DPs did everything in their power to avoid repatriation to the Soviet Union, which they perceived as a matter of life or death. While some tried to blend in to the local population, the majority tried to use "legal" means by contesting their Soviet citizenship status. In order to prove that they had left the Soviet Union before 1 September 1939, which would exempt them from the category of Soviet nationals, many falsely claimed to have left Russia for Europe in 1920 or to have been born in emigration in Europe. Similar strategies including stating Mongolia or Tibet as their place of birth, as well as changing their age, name, and date of birth. In order to remain in the Western zones of

²⁸ Proudfoot, *European Refugees*, p. 218; Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*, p. 90.

²⁹ Bethell, Nicholas, *The Last Secret. The Delivery to Stalin of Over Two Million Russians by Britain and the United States*. New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publishers, 1974, p. 151; See also Tolstoy, Nikolai, *The Secret Betrayal*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977, Chapter 8, p. 176-197.

³⁰ Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*, p. 90. See also Epstein, Julius, *Operation Keelhaul. The Story of Forced Repatriation from 1944 to the Present*. Old Greenwich: The Devin-Adair Company, 1973, p. 103-104. Vlasovites are members of the Russian Liberation Army (ROA, *Russkaya Osvoboditel'naya Armiya*), also known as the Armed Forces of the Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia (*V'S KONR, V'oornuzhennyye Sily Komiteta osvobodzheniya narodov Rossii*), which was headed by the Soviet general Andrei Vlasov, PoW who switched to the German side. Vlasovites consisted of former Soviet prisoners of war and White Russian emigres. In January 1945 the KONR severed its link with the German Army and helped Czech partisans liberate Prague from Nazis, before surrendering to the U.S. Third Army on 10 May 1945.

³¹ Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*, p. 174, 96.

³² Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*, p. 92-93.

³³ Wyman, *DPs*, p. 62.

³⁴ Elliott, Mark. "The United States and Forced Repatriation of Soviet Citizens, 1944-47." *Political Science Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (1973): 253-275.

Germany, they got themselves registered as ‘others’, ‘Nansen’³⁵, ‘stateless’, ‘Muslim’, ‘Roman Catholic’ or ‘of Orthodox religion’. For example, in their T/USA forms filled in 1946-1947 most Kalmyk refugees alleged to have held a Nansen passport or stamps, most without providing evidence. Typical reasons for not having these documents are given as either ‘confiscated by the Germans’ or ‘lost during an air raid’. In some cases, especially in 1948 IRO forms, the interviewers, however, seem to have been able to verify Nansen passports, and hence the ‘non-Soviet identity’ of its holders, by stating ‘he has a Nansen passport.’

The 1951 statements made to the IRO by Kalmyk DPs in anticipation of being resettled in the U.S., reveal the scale of this tactic. Many Kalmyks, whose stories were inconsistent in their previous documents, made the so-called ‘Statements in lieu of an oath’ in which they confessed to giving false information about their biographies in order to avoid ‘forced repatriation to the USSR’. Signed by the applicant and two witnesses (usually both Kalmyk) and notarized by an IRO Legal Counsellor, these statements resemble an oath pledging to provide truthful information on one’s legal status, nationality, and residence before the war. Here is an example of such a statement: ‘I, Purdwejew Dorscha, herewith state that having been afraid of forced repatriation to the USSR I have given false information concerning my biography. Now, wishing to emigrate the USA I don’t want to deceive the American authorities and desire to tell truth. My nationality is USSR and not Nansen as I mentioned before. From 1938 till December 1942 I was living in Werhniy Kurman, USSR, and not in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, as I mentioned it before in all my DP documents.’³⁶

Another known tactic among the Kalmyks was to avoid DP camps altogether³⁷. Whilst the number of Kalmyks residing outside refugee centers is unknown in our analysis which is based on the data collected in DP Camps of American zone, what is known is that living in the camps was not only not mandatory but moving between various camps was not restricted either. Some Kalmyks, especially those who lived in Europe before the war, did not go to Germany, but remained in the countries of their residence and were not screened in refugee centers. It is possible that some Soviet Kalmyks, who came to Europe with the Germany army and who either avoided local authorities or had escaped from the DP camps, sought assistance from these Old Kalmyks.

Methodology

Building on these broader narratives, our aim was to identify Kalmyks and collect their demographic information and narrative backgrounds as provided to the U.S. Army and fledgling organizations of the international community, including the International Refugee Organization. In total, our database is comprised of 231 unique files that include information on 350 Kalmyks, including single individuals and their family members. The large majority of the records (N=196) are held in digital form at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). An additional 35 records were identified when cross-checking the original data in the International Tracing Service (ITS) Online Archive (<https://www.its-arolsen.org/en/archives/digital-collections-online/>) and added to the

³⁵ Nansen or ‘League of Nations’ passport was a travel document that gave the right to its holder to travel in Europe. It was devised for the legal protection of refugees by Dr Fridtjof Nansen, the League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in June 1921. The Nansen International Office for Refugees was funded by proceeds from the issuance of Nansen passports and stamps that served as travel visas // World Digital Library <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/11576/>

³⁶ USHMM, ITS Archive, file no. P14515

³⁷ Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*, p. 173.

original set of files. These entries were found by searching for names, ethnicity, nationality and religion in the ITS archive.

Other primary sources include records of Kalmyk DPs held by the Tolstoy Foundation and the Brethren Church, two organizations that administered the resettlement of Kalmyks in the United States in the early 1950s. Interviews with eight Kalmyks were conducted in DP camps in Munich in 1950 by the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social History and provide contextual information on displacement and refugeedom among the Kalmyks; however, the precise identities of the informants cannot be disclosed to a third party due to U.S. government regulations.

Information collected in the database mainly draws from two sources. The first are U.S. Army questionnaires--referred to as TUSA forms--completed in the DP camps in the U.S. zone in Germany in 1946-1947. T/USA forms that provide biographical information on DPs, including their date and place of birth, ethnicity, nationality, places of residence and activities from 1939 to 1945, the names of their family members, identification documents, reasons for leaving home country and whether they intent to return. The purpose of T/USA forms and interviews was to establish one's Displaced Person status. June 1946 is the earliest known date when first TUSA interviews were conducted, although these interviews could have begun earlier that year.

The second are International Refugee Organization (IRO) Care and Maintenance forms (CM/1), completed in assembly centers in Germany between 1947 and 1951. These forms were 'compulsory screening questionnaires' that included biographical information and prewar and wartime activities of the applicants. Other information in each unique digital file includes various documents on the applicant and his/her family, such as birth certificates, legal statements, family data, health records, and photographs. This supplementary information was used in determining eligibility for IRO support and resettlement. Brown-Fleming cites Balint to suggest that CM/1 forms are often unreliable; applicants often told the 'right' story that the authorities wanted to hear because they were afraid of being repatriated back to their communist homelands.³⁸ We explore three specific examples of this dissembling in the subsequent section.

Three Narratives

Born in Russia. Claims to have left Russia in 1920 to go to school in Yugoslavia. Has certificate stating [it]. Has Yugoslavian student card went to Czechoslovakia [sic] 1925 as a student. Lived there to 1935. went back to Yugoslavia, claims he lived there to 1943 claims German police forced him into Germany. Has papers stating all statements he told also has a Nansen pass. stating he is a old Russian immigrant. Believed to be ~~Russian citizen~~.³⁹

Born in Russia. Left with his parents. Went through Constantinople to Belgrade. Claims he had the permission to stay in Belgrade with the Nansen stamp, but this was taken from him when he came to Gratz. Left in Sep 1944. Claims he was forced to Gratz for work. Stayed there for one month, then claimed was sent to Singelsdorf for work. Has certificate from the burgermeister that he stayed there till June 1945. Never served in any Army. Does not want to return. Wants to stay with Kalmooks.⁴⁰

³⁸ Brown-Fleming, Suzanne. *Nazi Persecution and Postwar Repercussions: The International Tracing Service Archive and Holocaust Research*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield (2016), p. 17.

³⁹ D00296/USHMM, Sodman Dalantinov, born in 1908, Denisovskaya, Russia.

⁴⁰ A04174 or 3.2.2.1/78886880-886884/ITS Digital Archive, Mashla Ashtanov, born in 1917, Altn Buluk, Russia.

*Born in Russia, fled in 1920 with White Army, then went to live in Yugoslavia lived there to 1944. Claims Germans forced him and his four horses into Dresden, took his horses away and put him into a camp, worked in forest 5 months. Feb 1945 claims because of bombardment he had to flee to Bavaria worked on farm till liberated by American troops May 1945. came to Krumbach DP Caserne Oct 1945. Has German work paper. Claims Germans took his Nansen passport.*⁴¹

The three narrative above each reproduce a standard script that is consistently deployed in Kalmyks' interviews with U.S. Army officers, which were conducted at DP camps in the American sector of postwar Germany between June 1946 and June 1947. All three are born in Russia, fled from the country following the defeat of the Whites in 1920, settled in or went through Yugoslavia during the interwar period, either have or had a Nansen passport, and were forced to work in Germany during World War II. Other relevant details emerge in individual narratives: the first interviewee reiterates that he is an old Russian emigrant, while his citizenship status is excised from the narrative; the second states that he never served in any army and that he does not want to return to Russia; the third has moved around southern Germany from 1944 onwards, and that the Germans confiscated his Nansen passport.

Only one of these stories is true. Originally from Don region, Sodman Dalantinov emigrated from Crimea in 1920 along with a Cadet school at the age of 12. He had a Nansen passport. Having studied at a Technical school in Prague, later he was a self-employed construction engineer in Belgrade until 1943, when he was forced to work in Germany. In Berlin he worked as a draftsman in Siemens factory until May 1945. After the war, Sodman worked for UNRRA and IRO in DP Camps Altenstadt, Niederrauau, and Pfaffenhofen as a camp and warehouse worker. In 1940 he married a Kalmyk woman born in emigration in Belgrade with whom he had 4 daughters. He was due to be resettled as a construction engineer. The Church of Brethren archive has more details on Sodman's biography: Dalantinov is his mother's maiden name since there were no boys in her family to continue the family name. Sodman's father was a White Army colonel named Bair Mangatov, who put together the first Cossack resistance units against the Red Army in 1917. Following his father's death, Sodman enrolled with the Don Cadet Academy in 1919. As the academy was evacuated from Novorosiisk to Yugoslavia, Sodman got separated from his mother and grandparents. After graduating from the Academy in 1925, Sodman was transferred to the Russian High School in Prague and later studied construction engineering at Prague University. After university, he returned to Belgrade, where he set up his construction company in 1941. In 1943 he was deported to Brandenburg, near Berlin, and was handed over to the Arbeitsamt (Labor Bureau). He was assigned to Siemens-Schuckert factory near Berlin, first as a general labourer, and a month later he became a draftsman. In Berlin Sodman joined the Kalmyk National Committee and became its secretary (the KNK was headed by Shamba Balinov who had pro-Nazi Germany views which he published in their newspaper 'Khalmag'). The Brethren Papers state that Sodman accepted the invitation from the KNK 'because he felt, that only in this way he could have possibly helped the lot of his countrymen enslaved by the Germans'. As the Red Army was approaching, in 1944 Sodman fled from Berlin to join Kalmyks in Schongau. There, as the Brethren Papers indicate, Sodman became a camp leader by the end of the war, 'but in October of 1945 was denounced by his own people' (by Sandechjew Alexej) and was arrested by the US Security authorities, locked up for three months without trial in Garmisch, then released'. Afterwards, Sodman moved from one camp to the next: In Krumbach, he worked as a camp teacher. In Pfaffenhofen, he was elected a camp leader in 1947. He also stayed in Ingolstadt and in Schleissheim, Munich. The Brethren Papers also state that Sodman speaks Kalmyk, Russian, Czech, German, some French and

⁴¹ B15510/USHMM, Andrei Burlakov, born in 1896, Chonos, Russia.

English and ‘has many friends and former colleagues in the States. They are assuring him that they will take care of him once he reaches the USA’. Sodman’s story of emigration in 1920 with his school is corroborated by his 1948 CM/1 IRO form and his file kept at the Brethren Church.

The other two narratives, both from T/USA forms, are inconsistent with the stories that emerge for each emigre from the later archival record. Mashla Ashtanov came from the Astrakhan region, where his father owned a farm with a large number of livestock. From 1932 (when he was age 15), he worked on a collective farm (kolkhoz) as a cattle breeder and shepherd. He never served in the army but was deported to Germany at the beginning of 1943; there, he worked in agriculture until liberation. Further detail on his experiences late in the war are found in the records of the Church of the Brethren: “He was sick in 1944 (rheumatism) and was the whole year in the hospital. Legs were badly frozen and in 1949 was operated. After one and half years in the hospital, he recovered and is now in quite good health. A type of common worker, no schooling, can only sign his name.”⁴² He did not live in Belgrade, but rather came to Germany from Astrakhan, and did not go through Constantinople with the old emigrants in 1920.

Andrei Burlakov changed details of his story at least 3 times: in 1946, 1948 (in his IRO Case of Family Data) and in 1950 (IRO CM/1 form Supplementary sheet). According to his 1946 statement, Andrei emigrated to Belgrade with Denikin’s Army in 1920 where he stayed until 1944. His 1948 statement, however, does not mention Belgrade. He may have chosen to change his story because, as the interviewer noted, ‘He can’t say a single word in Yugoslavian language, don’t [sic] know any street in Belgrade, where he says he was living from 1936 to 1944’. Andrei insisted that he fled to Turkey in 1921 with Wrangel’s Army only to return to the USSR in 1923, where he first worked in the village of Chonos in Kalmykia and later in Kazakhstan until 1943. From 1943, he states, he worked in Schongau, Germany. In his 1950 statement, Andrei yet again changes his story by contending that he worked in Karaganda until December 1942, became a soldier in the Red Army, and was taken prisoner by Germans in June 1943. The Brethren Papers offers the following clarification on Andrei’s conflicting stories. It confirms that Andrei, as he pointed out in his 1948 and 1950 statements, emigrated with Wrangel’s Army in 1920 and was among those who returned to Russia in 1922. In support of this version of his story, the Brethren provides a detailed account of Andrei return to the USSR, his interrogation by the NKVD and his time there:

‘Homesickness and ill-famed “Amnesty” drove him back home. Tells of the story how he and others were officially “pardoned” by the Soviet Political Representative (Polpred) in Constantinople. “We were given a large sized document, the size of napkin, with lots of seals and signatures and we were told that our sins ‘against the people’ have long been forgotten and forgiven by the magnanimous Soviet regime, we could sail for home in peace and rejoin our folks”. Reached Novorossijsk (a Black Sea port) and thought he was really going “home”. Instead, however, he was at once arrested and dispatched forthwith to Rostov on Don where the Cheka took charge of him. After fifteen days and nights of continuous “murderous” grilling and questioning, he says, he was lucky to have been able to prove that he never was an officer of the White Army, that he was merely an orderly at the C. Hos [sic]. He was released “conditionally”, allowed to return to his native region but remained under the surveillance of the regional NKVD. Every month, for a year, he was obliged to report to the regional NKVD. The family farm and the homestead, everything, he said, was destroyed or confiscated. He became a day laborer and existed hand to mouth, until 1925. Then he managed to secure a job with the “Co-operative” as a general worker, for one year. For the

⁴² The Durnbaugh Kalmuk Papers, p. 29.

next three years he managed to acquire his own horse and a plot of land for farming. In 1928 this to (sic) was confiscated merged into a Kolkhoz. He fled, rather than work in a kolkhoz and after a lot of adventures, reached Karaganda and worked in the coal mines until 1942’.

The Brethren Papers confirm that Andrei was drafted in the Red Army and was taken prisoner by Germans. Before ending up in Dresden, Germany, in 1944, Andrei was in camps in Ukraine and Romania. The Papers also offer an assessment of his character and learning abilities: ‘Cheerful disposition. In addition to his native tongue and pretty good Russian, he speaks German. Is sure he will be able to learn English “in no time”, he says’.

Conclusion

Fearful of repatriation to the Soviet Union, where the best possible outcome that individual Kalmyks could have hoped for was to be sent to exile in Siberia, Kalmyk DPs in postwar Europe deployed a range of survival strategies to stay on in the camps controlled by the western armies. While the camps were a place of protracted displacement, uncertainty, and ambiguity for all the DPs, in comparison with their Slavic neighbors, the Kalmyk DPs were doubly marginalized and doubly disadvantaged due to their national, historical, and racial background, not to mention their small numbers. If in the eyes of the Soviet authorities the Kalmyks were ‘traitors’, for the Westerners they were ‘Soviet/Communist citizens of inferior Asiatic race’, which limited their prospects for a permanent resettlement in more desired destinations.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and story-telling is one of the weapons of the weak, if the powerful are willing to listen. In the postwar Europe, the international refugee organizations not only listened but also recorded what they had heard. The files and documents that we have analyzed show the extent to which many Kalmyk DPs used the oral forms of ‘resistance’ to the powerful. Not only was story-telling a form of practical ‘resistance’ against the threat of being repatriated to the Soviet Union, it was also a means to reshape one’s identity and destiny. Kalmyks made a set of decisions about how to communicate their legibility to state and non-state actors who determined the status of DPs in postwar Europe. What the Kalmyk DPs achieved through story-telling was to turn their multiple disadvantages into advantage in the process recasting not only their individual stories and identities but also changing their entire ‘race’. With the magic of the word and the help of the international bureaucratic machinery that processes it, not only did many Kalmyk DPs turn from Soviet citizens into Europe-based Nansen individuals, but as a group they were transformed from an Asiatic community into a ‘European people’.

The end of WW II was a period of intense knowledge production in Europe and beyond when histories were rewritten, alliances forged and broken, national borders redrawn, and identities reshaped. The case of the Kalmyk DPs is only one of many small and forgotten stories of this truly continental endeavor that was taking place in the shadows of the looming cold war. In an era of debate over truth, untruth, and gradations between, these historical records provide tangible evidence of the Kalmyks’ experience of being DPs, their identity negotiation strategies, and the formation of Kalmyk diasporas outside their Russian homeland, in the U.S. and Europe.