Tracing Dagestani Deportees from Opochka to Tashkent

Notes on Transnational Archival Research and Decolonization

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In December 1878, Dagestani prisoners wrote a collective petition while incarcerated in the small town of Opochka, near Pskov, in northwestern Russia. The men, hailing from Gazikumukh (now Kumukh, Dagestan), participated in a failed anticolonial uprising during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78, were arrested, and, without any interrogation or court proceedings, were deported to Opochka. They wrote a petition, in Arabic, to the Caucasus viceroy, reaffirming their loyalty to the Russian emperor and pleading with the viceroy to allow them to return to Dagestan. They lamented that in Opochka, a "remote and harsh place," one-third of their people had already perished of a "disease similar to cholera."[1]

Several Dagestani deportees were ʿulama (Muslim scholars), likely educated in madrasas (schools) in the Caucasus and Crimea and fluent in Arabic and Persian. In an exquisite and heartbreaking petition, they professed their innocence (see fig. 1). "We are the people obedient to the authorities, frail old men," they pleaded. "We fear for our lives if we have to live here until next year."[2] Opochka, once frequented by Alexander Pushkin during his own, more comfortable exile in his family estate in nearby Mikhailovskoe, was an obscure destination for the exile of Dagestani insurgents, which was the point. This small town became a prison—site of unfreedom and death—for at least 800 Dagestani deportees and their

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[1] Sakartvelos sakhelmtsipo saistorio arkivi (National Historical Archive of Georgia, SSSA) f. 545, op. 1, d. 1473, l. 414 (in Arabic, 14 December 1878), ll. 415–17 (Russian translation).

[2] SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 1473, l. 414.

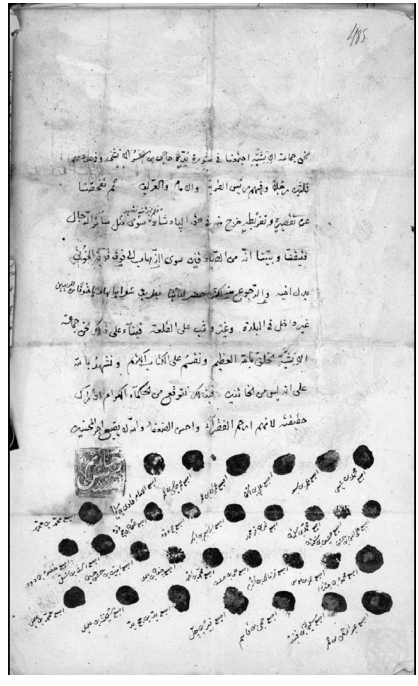

Figure 1 (left). Petition by Dagestani deportees to return to Dagestan. Opochka, 20 April 1879. SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 1473, l. 414.

Figure 2 (right). Petition by Dagestani deportees to pardon Hajj bin Asadullah. Opochka, c. July 1879. SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 1473, l. 485.

families, serving its role in the management of Russia's colonial empire in the Caucasus.[3] This article, by focusing on the fate of Dagestani prisoners and the wider impact of their story through documents in Georgia and Uzbekistan, reflects on conducting transnational archival research and what that means for decolonization of the field.

In the summer of 1879, about 30 deportees in Opochka sent another petition, in Arabic, to the Pskov governor. They implored him to release one of them, Hajj bin Asadullah, who had reportedly not participated in the uprising but found himself swept up in deportation orders by mistake, in place of his brother.[4] They attached their thumbprints to attest to the truthfulness of their plea (see fig. 2). This petition in Arabic echoes many others, by Dagestani deportees scattered throughout Russia after 1877.[5] Many of these deportees were not pardoned and were not allowed to return to the Caucasus. Several hundred Dagestanis were buried in Opochka

[3] SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 1473, ll. 36–44 (21 October 1877), 201 (5 January 1878).

[4] SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 1473, l. 485 (in Arabic, c. July 1879), ll. 484, 486 (Russian translation).

[5] SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 1473, l. 414, ll. 478–81, 492, 531–35, 549–52, 568–69.

at a site that locals had referred to as a "Muslim cemetery" or "Dagestani cemetery." Today, its location is lost to memory.[6]

The Dagestani petitioners in Opochka were among over 5,000 deportees from the Dagestan and Terek provinces. Their journeys—from Avar, Dargin, Lak, and Chechen villages to jails in Temir-Khan-Shura (Buynaksk), Derbent, and Vladikavkaz, and finally to sites of deportation in the Pskov, Novgorod, Saratov, Riazan', Tula, Vologda, Olonets (Karelia), Orel, Tambov, and other governorates—unfolded within the territory of the modern-day Russian Federation.[7] The archival footprint of their journeys, however, covers a larger geography.

The aforementioned petitions are not held in the Opochka district archive, the Pskov oblast archive, the Dagestan republican archive, or the Russian State Historical Archive in St. Petersburg. Instead, they are preserved in the Georgian National Historical Archive, which holds the largest Russian imperial archive in the Caucasus. Tbilisi (or Tiflis) was the seat of the Caucasus Viceroyalty (1785–96, 1844–81, 1905–17), which encompassed the North and South Caucasus. Dagestani petitions found their way from various Russian provinces to Tbilisi, where executive decisions about the fate of Caucasus deportees were made, and they were eventually deposited in the national archive.

Documents in the Georgian archive challenge what we know about Dagestani deportees, whose trace typically ends after their rebellion and arrest. Those men were not mere observers of an exile to which the state condemned them but exercised agency to better their fate. They petitioned various officials, put forward arguments for collective relocations and individual pardons, and supported each other during exile. These documents allow us rare insight into who deportees were and what a toll collective punishment took on them and their families.

[6] Elena Iazemova, "Na katorgu v Opochku," *Argumenty i Fakty—Pskov* 21 (23 May 2018), https://pskov.aif.ru/gazeta/number/37810.

[7] On the uprising of 1877, see Timur M. Aitberov, Iu. U. Dadaev, and Kh. A. Omarov, eds., *Vosstaniia dagestantsev i chechentsev v posleshamilevskuiu epokhu i imamat 1877 goda* (Makhachkala: DGU, 2001); Makhach A. Musaev, "Dagestanskoe dukhovenstvo 60–70-kh godov XIX veka i vosstanie 1877 goda" (Candidate's diss., DNTs RAN, Makhachkala, 2003); on memories of it in post-1877 Dagestan, see Rebecca Gould, *Writers and Rebels: The Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), chap. 2; and on the exile of rebels, see Austin Jersild, "Imperial Russification: Dagestani Mountaineers in Russian Exile, 1877–83," *Central Asian Survey* 19, 1 (2000): 5–16. Itineraries of deportations are preserved in Tsentral´nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Respubliki Dagestan (Central State Archive of the Republic of Dagestan) f. 126, op. 2, d. 19.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 upended the field of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian studies on practically every level. The unavailability of Russian archives, owing to the risks of, and ethical concerns about, travel to Russia, seems like a catastrophe for a field already winnowed in decades since the end of the Cold War, and especially for early career researchers, who are disproportionately affected by the defunding of the humanities and the collapse of the academic job market. Russia's invasion also prompted many scholars to call for the long-overdue decolonization, or rethinking the place of Russia and Russia-centered narratives, in studying and teaching the region.[8] Scholars of Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia have been doing this work, often undervalued and underplatformed, for decades. I suggest that transnational archival work outside of Russia provides opportunities to build more inclusive narratives of tsarist and Soviet histories. Comparing how the empire was experienced, and what impact its policies had, in multiple locations in the borderlands might help us to reexamine what we already know from vantage points of the imperial capitals or individual peripheral sites.

Transnational archival work will not be news to many scholars who focus on countries in the Caucasus, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Baltic states. I offer this reflection with an expectation that, in the coming

[8] See forum "Approaches to Decolonization," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 65, 2 (2023): 141–244; forum "Has History Betrayed Us? Debating Historical Narratives through the Prism of Russia's War against Ukraine," *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2022): 65–126, incl. Botakoz Kassymbekova, "On Decentering Soviet Studies and Launching New Conversations," *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2022): 115–20; special issue "Conversations within the Field: Russia's War against Ukraine and the Future of Russian Studies," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39, 1–2 (2003): 1–120; articles on decolonization in *APSA Comparative Politics Newsletter* 33, 1 (2023): 2–20, incl. Şener Aktürk, "Reversing the Gaze and Decolonizing Political Science," *APSA Comparative Politics Newsletter* 33, 1 (2023): 5–8; Botakoz Kassymbekova and Erica Marat, "Time to Question Russia's Imperial Innocence," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, 27 April 2022, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/time-to-question-russias-imperial-innocence/; Ewa Thompson, "On Decolonizing Slavic Studies in Europe and America," *Deliberatio*, 21 May 2023, https://deliberatio.eu/en/analyses/on-decolonizing-slavic-studies-in-europe-and-america; Marina Mogilner, "There Can Be No 'Vne,'" *Ab Imperio*, no. 4 (2021): 24–26; Artem Shaipov and Yuliia Shaipova, "It's High Time to Decolonize Western Russia Studies," *Foreign Policy* (11 February 2023); Juliet Johnson, "De-centering Russia: Challenges and Opportunities," ASEEES 2023 Presidential Address, 4 December 2023, http://www.web19b.aseees.pitt.edu/news-events/aseees-blog-feed/2023-presidents-address-de-centering-russia-challenges-and; Hiroaki Kuromiya, "Russia's Undue Influence on Western Scholars and Scholarship," *Forum on Ukrainian Studies*, 30 June 2023, https://ukrainian-studies.ca/2023/06/30/russias-undue-influence-of-western-scholars-and-scholarship/; the mission statement of RUTA: Association for Central, South-Eastern, Eastern European, Baltic, Caucasus, Central and Northern Asian Studies, https://ruta-association.org/mission-statement/.

years, many new scholars might conduct archival research in post-Soviet archives outside of Russia. My path has been that of an Ottoman historian, with earlier fieldwork for my first book, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State*, in the Middle East and the North Caucasus, specifically Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia-Alania, and Dagestan, as well as Moscow.[9] Since the mid-2010s, I have been fortunate to have conducted research in the national archives of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Admittedly, my research focus—on Muslim displacement—is transnational by nature, facilitating multi-sited archival research. Transnational archival research outside of Russia has its limits. For some topics, archives in Russia will remain essential. Yet, for those topics that touch the empire as a whole, many post-Soviet archives outside of Russia, and especially outside of national capitals, remain underused and hold the potential to revise our understanding of the empire.

The dispersal of tsarist and Soviet sources across national archives and hundreds of regional and district archives in 15 countries is a phenomenal thing. It allows, in principle at least, for local research on topics of national and regional significance and keeps original historical sources close to areas of their focus. Considering the 20th-century history of archival centralization in other parts of the world, we should not take this archival scattering for granted. There are pitfalls of this archival dispersal: it privileges administrative centers and knowledge production from their vantage point; increases the risk of losing archival heritage of entire regions (the historical archive of Chechnya and Ingushetia lost up to 85 percent of its collection during the Chechen Wars of 1994–96 and 1999–2000; the historical archive of Abkhazia perished amid the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict in 1992; and the KGB archive of Chernihiv, Ukraine, was destroyed by Russian missiles in 2022); and scatters documents on the same topic—as the case of Dagestani deportees demonstrates—raising the cost and logistical barriers of archival research. Yet not putting all eggs in one basket also has advantages, especially at a time when research in Russia presents ethical, logistical, and financial challenges. The consistency of the Soviet archiving culture, reflected most conspicuously in the cataloguing hierarchy of *fond–opis´–delo*, facilitates one's transnational research in a way unthinkable to scholars of other regions; familiarity with one post-Soviet archive drastically reduces the time needed to orient oneself in another.

[9] Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

In the summer of 2023, I unexpectedly traced the story of Dagestani deportees in a different archive, almost 4,000 kilometers from Opochka. In 1881, the Cabinet of Ministers of the Russian Empire reviewed a commissioned report about conditions in the Pskov Governorate. The report acknowledged, among many things, that Dagestani deportees in Opochka were dying because they were not used to the local climate. The Russian sovereign (Alexander III, shortly after his inauguration in March) had left a handwritten note on the report: "It would be much better to send them to Turkestan or the south of Russia."[10] This note could be interpreted as a sign of either compassion or practical interest in preserving deportees' lives as befitting an efficient carceral system. Prompted to act on the emperor's note, the imperial bureaucracy sprang into action. The Department of the State Police sent a request for information to Konstantin von Kaufman, the first governor-general of Turkestan, on whether Turkestan could accommodate Dagestani deportees languishing in northwestern Russia.[11]

Kaufman's thoughts on the matter survive as a rough draft of a report to Russia's interior minister. It is preserved in the Central State Archive of Uzbekistan in Tashkent. The largest tsarist archive in Central Asia, it serves as a repository of internal documentation of the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan (1867–1917). Kaufman professed how much he wished to satisfy his sovereign's wish, yet "the settlement of the rebellious Caucasians in the Turkestan region [was] undesirable."[12] He explained his reasoning by appealing to stereotypes, presenting North Caucasian Muslims as belligerent and rebellious and Central Asian Muslims as docile and impressionable:

> The inhabitants of the region [Turkestan] are related [to North Caucasians] by religion but differ significantly from them in character. Neither the Uzbeks, nor the Tajiks, nor the *Kirgiz* [meaning at the time: Turkic nomads, including Kazakhs and Kyrgyz], who form the topographical composition of the region, have that militancy that has long been shown by the Caucasians, or that hostility toward everything alien to them by religion. Nevertheless, they are extremely receptive to any propaganda, and I fear that, if they come into contact with energetic Caucasians, they might fraternize with them, thanks to the common religion, and succumb to their influence.[13]

[10] O'zbekiston Respublikasi Markaziy Davlat Arxivi (Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan; ORMDA) f. I-1, op. 16, d. 2401, ll. 1–2 (29 June 1881).
[11] ORMDA f. I-1, op. 16, d. 2401, ll. 1–2 (29 June 1881).
[12] ORMDA f. I-1, op. 16, d. 2401, ll. 3–4 (30 September 1881).
[13] ORMDA f. I-1, op. 16, d. 2401, ll. 3–4.

The governor-general of Turkestan rejected the idea of interning Dagestanis in Central Asia, as it could harm Russia's governance and went contrary to tsarist migration policies in the region. He stressed that among the chief tasks of his administration were to increase the number of Russian settlements and to attract the "Russian element" into Turkestan's cities; it was the Russian population on whom the government could rely in case of any disturbances.[14] Kaufman's policy betrays the anxiety about Pan-Islamism, or an aspiration of unity among global Muslims. Since the 1870s, tsarist officials considered Pan-Islamism a serious danger to Russia's governance in Muslim provinces. The paranoia about Russian Muslims' disloyalty grew substantially after the uprisings in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Abkhazia in support of the Ottoman Empire in 1877–78. Dagestani rebels, who were singled out for either execution or deportation, became the very symbol of anti-tsarist rebellion in the Muslim provinces. The deportation of Dagestani insurgents far outside of the Caucasus to prevent their mixing with Caucasus Muslims was an outcome of the Russian government's "Pan-Islamic panic," and so was the Turkestan administration's refusal to accept Dagestani deportees, lest they mix with Central Asian Muslims.[15]

This document, preserved in Tashkent, adds a transregional dimension to the story of Dagestani deportation. Tsarist officials throughout the empire, and especially in Muslim provinces, watched closely what happened in the Caucasus during the last Russo-Ottoman war. The uprising in Dagestan reinforced tsarist prejudices, for example, about types of Islam and Muslims in the empire and ideal settlers for the newest Muslim provinces. What happened in the Caucasus during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78 reverberated in Central Asia. The Dagestanis' deportation to a remote place like Opochka was no mere local story; tsarist officials in places as far away as Tashkent extricated lessons from it about loyalty, colonization, and security in the empire's borderlands.

Transnational archival research might facilitate decolonization of our scholarship in several ways. First, diversifying the source base and adding

[14] ORMDA f. I-1, op. 16, d. 2401, ll. 3–4.

[15] Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, "Letters from the Ottoman Empire: Migration from the Caucasus and Russia's Pan-Islamic Panic," *Slavic Review* 82, 2 (2023): 311–33; Alexander Morrison, "Sufism, Pan-Islamism and Information Panic: Nil Sergeevich Lykoshin and the Aftermath of the Andijan Uprising," *Past & Present* 214, 1 (2012): 255–304.

new geographic settings foster a more complete, richer story. In a massive empire, whether tsarist or Soviet, practically every story can be written as a transregional history because it likely was. Ideas and people moved around, and institutions and policies were implemented across a massive geography. An anticolonial uprising in tsarist Dagestan could lead to incarceration in northwestern Russia and harden colonial perceptions about Islam and immigration in Central Asia. Second, multi-sited research allows us to reframe imperial developments by decentering experiences of Russia or centering other regions alongside Russia. To understand the empire—past, present, and future—necessitates looking at it from as many vantage points as possible because the empire survives through adaptation and cooptation, appearing differently to its many subjects. Local context matters a great deal. Finally, and most important, pursuing research in a new location is an opportunity to immerse oneself in local scholarship and expertise. Scholarship about tsarist and Soviet rule, produced in the 14 republics in over 30 years, makes for an extraordinarily sophisticated historiography, with often radically different interpretations from scholarly frameworks in Russia. Yet the latter might still be better known and command broader circulation in Western academia. If we take seriously the slogans of decolonization and liberation—the themes of the ASEEES (Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies) annual conventions in 2023 and 2024—consistently engaging with and elevating the work of scholars based in the former Soviet Union, especially those with more limited institutional reach, including in Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, should be a cornerstone of any meaningful decolonizing work.[16]

Archival research in other post-Soviet states cannot be approached with the purpose of replacing materials presently unavailable in Moscow and St. Petersburg. That would be a flawed methodological premise, which is likely to disappoint.[17] Primary sources in district, provincial, and state archives often reflect different stages of knowledge production and multiple levels within the imperial bureaucracy. One would have difficulty telling a comprehensive imperial story from the perspective of Moscow or St. Petersburg by using documents solely from Riga or Baku. Archival materials from the borderlands of the former empire give insight into other kinds of imperial histories. Sources from the imperial core often tell us what the

[16] See Victoria Donovan, "Against Academic 'Resourcification': Collaboration as Delinking from Extractivist 'Area Studies' Paradigms," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 65, 2 (2023): 163–73.
[17] See Anna Whittington, "Diversity and Familiarity: A Conversation about Archival Research," *ASEEES NewsNet*, 17 May 2024, https://aseees.org/newsnet-article/diversity-and-familiarity-a-conversation-about-archival-research-with-anna-whittington/.

imperial bureaucracy envisioned would happen through its policies, how it understood regional implementation, and how it constructed hierarchies. By contrast, those produced outside of the core reveal the effects of imperial policies and local adjustments or resistance to them, or how the empire was experienced in non-Russian regions.

Research in a different national setting requires careful preparation. Familiarity with regional and local history is key. The study of local languages is indispensable, even for those working primarily with sources in Russian, not to "skip over documents" in other languages that might provide new perspectives on the topic.[18] One might have difficulty navigating post-1991 archival guides without the knowledge of national languages and scripts. Learning the history of the archive is also critical. While many post-Soviet archives may retain remarkable administrative and even physical similarities, each has its own institutional history of assembling and cataloging the collection, with accelerating divergence since the 1990s. Spending too little time at a new archive carries the risk of probing what is in there without learning answers to critical questions of why it is there and what is missing.

The chief impediment to transnational research is unsteady access to many post-Soviet archives. Obtaining research permission for national historical archives has been near-impossible in Turkmenistan, notoriously difficult in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan, and subject to recent limitations in Georgia. Often, the application process is not made publicly explicit and requires advance applications, which are vetted by multiple parties, including state security. The approval process can take considerable time, complicating the logistics of planning and funding overseas research. This process, so often lacking in transparency, can hit a snag easily, sometimes because of censorship or blacklisting and often because of administrative neglect or human error; one rarely knows the actual reason. For those who receive precious access, the availability of documents, some of which remain classified or have been reclassified for undisclosed reasons, is never guaranteed, similar to how it was in the Soviet Union or remains in the Russian Federation. Furthermore, war and occupation make research unsafe or impossible in parts of Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.

Transnational research also presents financial challenges. Traveling from place to place is expensive, particularly without the ability to plan in advance, as one rarely knows how much time they will need in a new

[18] Whittington, "Diversity and Familiarity."

archive. In the meantime, housing costs and airfare seem to be skyrocketing everywhere, putting much pressure on the travel budget. Funding for overseas research is scarce, especially for doctoral students and independent scholars. In recent years, the Social Science Research Council, the Mellon Foundation, and the Ford Foundation phased out their long-standing fellowships that provided funding for overseas doctoral research. Those all are considerable barriers for multicountry research at a time when it is especially needed.

For me, the value—and joy—of transnational archival research has been finding threads about the same story told by different actors in multiple locations and weaving them into a richer narrative. For example, documents in Tbilisi and Tashkent about Dagestanis in Opochka provide new layers to the history of their deportation: from local and personal, focusing on individuals' plight, to transregional and political, showing what lessons imperial officials drew from their rebellion against the empire.

The current moment of breakage and soul-searching offers an opportunity to rethink everything, including reexamining key narratives of Russian and Soviet history and how we do our research. This might very well reinvigorate the field, as scholars engage with theory from other fields, look more closely at diasporas, data-mine digitized newspapers, and, yes, continue archival work in places where the empire has revealed itself the most.

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