

## Refugee Haven or Dumping Ground?

### A Comparative Study of Displaced Persons in Central Asia During World War II

#### LAURE Award Reflective Essay

Last fall semester, I took the Havighurst Center Colloquium on Central Asia under Khans, Tsars, and Commissars with Dr. Prior. I was given the opportunity to create an original research paper looking at Central Asian history and Soviet Studies. At the same time, I took a course on the era of the World Wars with a different professor. I realized that the two topics overlapped and wanted to know what role Central Asia played as a part of the Soviet Union during World War II. Ultimately, I chose to research the complex situation of people displaced to Central Asia by the war.

I have always gravitated toward World War II history. It was a time of great social and political change, laying the foundation for the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and 70s in the United States, changes to women's roles worldwide, and the United Nations formed.

This was my first major independent research paper and the first research topic that I have ever presented at an academic forum. While doing final research, I presented my topic to the 2020 Ohio Undergraduate Russian, East European, and Eurasian Research Forum hosted by Ohio State University. The unique challenges of this topic forced me to think creatively while researching to find solutions.

Since I was remote during the Fall 2020 semester, I was extremely grateful for all the Miami University Library's digital resources. The library's new Limited Online Library Access Lending (LOLA) Service that allowed me to access a book digitally was especially helpful.

Through LOLA, I accessed a key secondary source that deeply investigated my topic on an individual experience level. Since many primary sources were in languages I could not understand, having access to such a detailed secondary source analyzing primary sources, many originally in Russian or Uzbek, was extremely valuable to my project.

Jenny Presnell, the History librarian, made a course guide to help guide my class towards sources specific to Central Asia that I found very helpful. The Russian, Eastern European, and Eurasian Studies database guide also proved to be valuable. Through the library's databases, I was able to identify several books and articles to use as secondary sources and discovered a valuable primary source in the form of a memoir.

Being unable to read Ukrainian, Turkish, Russian, and other Central Asian languages limited the primary and secondary sources I was able to utilize. However, finding sources in other languages with English abstracts proved valuable as it often presented new information and helped create a broader understanding of Central Asia during World War II, even if it wasn't related to my topic. Oftentimes, these abstracts presented words that I had yet to use in search engines.

Consulting my World War II class professor, I was directed towards other useful sources and an online database created by another university of primary documents on Soviet Union policies and decrees in translation.

I initially thought it would be a simple, straightforward topic to determine why so many people found refuge in Central Asia. As I started researching, I discovered that I had to redefine my research question and even the words I was using to describe the different groups of people that found themselves in Central Asia. I had to expand and develop my understanding of words

including refugee, deportee, evacuee, and displaced person. Only after learning the terms and how they applied to different groups of displaced people could I start to understand the experiences of individuals caught up in such a calamity.

As I continued to learn and better understand my topic, I had to revise my thesis statement several times. At first redirecting from why to who and what, then trimming down from attempting to understand every group to just understanding the displaced people from outside of Central Asia. I had to focus on the displaced people and couldn't delve into the challenges of locals accepting displaced people. I eventually had to choose whether to focus on the experience of adults or the experiences of children. Ultimately, my sources decided for me as only one really discussed the experiences of displaced children.

I found it challenging to be specific with the experiences of individuals; with the limitations of my sources and time to research, I elected to focus on analyzing the overall common experiences of each group. By broadening to look at group experiences, trends of privilege, politics, and the displaced people's shared problems in Central Asia became apparent and easier to understand. I was still able to use the individual experiences I found while researching in my finished paper.

This research project prepared me for further research into World War II's uncomfortable truths and history in general, allowing me to see that I can examine difficult and painful subjects without being dragged down by them. I learned how to evaluate and scrutinize contradictions between stated government policy and reality, privilege and its effects, and human life complexities in total warfare. I learned how to present my research to an academic forum at the 2020 Ohio Undergraduate Russian, East European, and Eurasian Research Forum hosted by

Ohio State University. The research methods I utilized in pursuit of this topic prepared me to start a History Honors thesis this semester and for participating in the Undergraduate Summer Scholars program this summer. This project's experience has prepared me for future research projects and cultivated problem-solving skills that I can use in my career beyond my time at Miami University.