

ESCAPING IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY RUSSIA*

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This article considers the escapees who populated Russia's twentieth century in astonishingly large numbers. By escapees, the authors mean not only those who had been incarcerated, exiled, and deported, but also others who ignored or willfully violated regulations limiting movement – peasant settlers moving “irregularly” to scarcely-populated or recently depopulated areas; seasonal workers making independent employment arrangements; migrants to the city without the proper papers but desperate to access resources unavailable in the countryside; officials keen to avoid inferior assignments; refugees and evacuees deviating from assigned destinations. These evasive practices are characterized as migrant *repertoires*, that is, the relationships and networks of contact marked by geographic origin, gender, kinship, friendship, and professional identity that permitted them to adapt to or evade particular migration regimes. State-organized *regimes* of migration set the terms and resources of movement for all sorts of migrants, from settlers to deportees. The range of migrants surveyed confirms the ambition of Imperial and especially Soviet authorities to manage their peoples, but also the limited capacity of these states to do so. Thus the article suggests that the assumption of people's powerlessness in the face of overwhelming state power should be reconsidered.

Keywords: migration; migration pactices; seasonal labor; urbanization; unauthorized migrants; career migration; deportees.

Предметом внимания авторов статьи являются самовольные мигранты, которых в России в XX в. было поразительно много. Под самовольными мигрантами подразумеваются не только заключенные в тюрьму, сосланные и депортированные, но и те, кто игнорировал либо умышленно

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нарушал правила, ограничивающие передвижение, – крестьяне-поселенцы, осуществлявшие «нерегулярные» миграции в малонаселенные или недавно оставленные людьми районы; сезонные работники, самостоятельно вступавшие в трудовые отношения; мигранты в города, не имевшие необходимых документов, но отчаянно нуждавшиеся в доступе к ресурсам, отсутствующим в сельской местности; должностные лица, стремившиеся избежать невыгодных для себя назначений; беженцы и эвакуированные, отклонявшиеся от предписанного маршрута. Эти миграционные практики характеризуются в контексте межличностных взаимоотношений и сетей контактов по признакам географического происхождения, пола, родства, дружбы и профессиональной идентичности, позволяющим им адаптироваться либо уклоняться от определенных миграционных режимов. Организованные государством режимы миграции устанавливают условия и ресурсы передвижения для всех видов мигрантов, от поселенцев до депортированных. Результаты опроса ряда мигрантов подтверждают стремление имперских и особенно советских властей управлять людьми, но в то же время демонстрируют ограниченность их возможностей в этой сфере. Таким образом, авторы статьи полагают, что предположение о бессилии людей перед лицом подавляющей государственной машины преувеличено.

Ключевые слова: миграция; миграционные практики; сезонная занятость; урбанизация; самовольные мигранты; карьерная миграция; депортированные.

Escapees populated Russia's twentieth century in astonishingly large numbers and in the great variety of ways they ignored or willfully violated regulations limiting movement. They included everyone from Stalin and Trotsky – both of whom evaded their Imperial Russian captors in Siberian exile more than once – to tens of thousands of peasants deported as kulaks to special settlements during Stalin's collectivization drive in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Soviet Union under Stalin is notorious for its carceral regimes of prison camps, labor colonies, and euphemistically defined "special settlements," but this is not the half of it.

More so than its Imperial Russian predecessor – and arguably exceeding in intent the governments of any other country in the twentieth century – the Soviet state sought to control the movements of everyone not only across its borders but also within them. It did so by establishing a plethora of procedures administered by a bevy of bureaucrats. Some of the procedures and the personnel were holdovers from the old regime; others were brand new. Together they constituted what we refer to as regimes of migration. Prospective resettlers – peasants seeking to make a new start on land somewhere else; seasonal migrants seeking to supplement their income during slow times at home; migrants to the city escaping starvation or simply limited opportunities; technical specialists and bureaucrats assigned to posts remote from major cities; military inductees; evacuees; and deportees –

all had to obtain approval for moving to a new location or follow instructions, travel in mandated convoys, and obey officials in charge of arranging their transport and accommodation. Except that many didn't.

In what follows we synoptically analyze the evasive practices of different categories of migrants. We consider these practices characteristic of migrants' repertoires, that is, the relationships and networks of contact marked by geographic origin, gender, kinship, friendship, and professional identity that permitted them to adapt to – or evade – particular migration regimes. As in our larger study, we proceed from less to more coercive regimes [Siegelbaum, Moch]. Our argument throughout hinges on the observation that a dialectical relationship existed between the ambitions of the Imperial Russian and Soviet states to regulate migration within their borders and the resort to evasive action by migrants. The word, invented by state officials to characterize such action was *samovol'nost'*. Literally this translates as "self-willed"; most often it is rendered in English as "irregular." Neither quite captures the relational dynamic we seek to emphasize.

"Irregular" Resettlers

Many who sought to resettle beyond the Urals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did so illegally, as often happens in long-distance migration. Moving from one place to another was common, and although most managed to adjust to conditions on the frontier, a substantial proportion returned home. The legality of migration of course depended on the conditions imposed by the state. These initially were quite stringent. Peasants had to obtain permission from both their own commune and the one they wished to join. Certain regions remained off limits. Officials eventually began to look more favorably upon resettlement as a means of alleviating population pressure in the central Russian heartland and strengthening the Russian presence in the Asian part of the empire to counterbalance what they perceived as growing threats from Japanese expansionists, incursions of Chinese migrants, and the "backwardness" of indigenous Kazakh nomads. The problem then became how to ensure "correct colonization," that is, matching resources to population and rationally distributing services [Treadgold, p. 67-81; Coquin, p. 349-385; Sunderland, p. 177-220; Holquist].

"Irregular" (*samovol'nye*) migrants shadowed the state's regime at every stage of its long, tortured evolution. Even after 1896 when the Resettlement Administration made reduced fares and other assistance contingent on following proper procedures for registering land, a significant proportion of migrants did not do so. If slightly over one in every four passing through the Siberian gateway town of Cheliabinsk in 1895 lacked authorization to settle, then in the following year irregulars made up 44 percent of all settlers and by 1899 over half (53 percent) of the total [Кайфман, 1901, с. 51]. The proportion would decline thereafter but rarely dip below 20 percent. It would be overly romantic to ascribe such behavior to a longing for

freedom or the persistence of resistance against the weight of the tutelary state. For every group of settlers who squatted on land in remote regions undetected – at least for a while – by agents of the state, or who had decided from the beginning to have nothing to do with officialdom, most migrated irregularly for quite mundane reasons [Комитет Сибирской железной дороги, с. 202–203; Ядринцев, с. 473–474; Кауфман, 1897, с. 27–28, 33].¹ Some migrants registered for a certain parcel, but only to take advantage of the reduced fare so that they could have a look around, perhaps settling somewhere else, or working for wages [Сборник узаконений]. More often, they set out for a parcel on which they were registered only to run out of funds or otherwise change their minds en route causing them to end their journey somewhere else. Other settlers sought to follow the rules only to be confronted by local officials' refusal to grant them permission to leave their commune, or delays in the processing of requests that could drag on for years (by which time applicants might already have sold their property), or assignments to places the applicants had not requested [Кауфман, 1895, т. 1, ч. 1, с. 11, 16, 33, 37, 82, 84, 118, 129, 181, 257, 269; ч. 2, с. 44; ч. 3, с. 2; Станкевич, с. 117].

Whatever the reason, irregular settlers violated the Resettlement Administration's commitment to rational settlement as well as officials' own *amour propre*. No less troublesome for officials were settlers who had registered with a particular commune or received permission to form their own but who, after awhile, picked up stakes again and moved on. In some cases, according to ethnographers' investigations, this was because new settlers wore out their welcome with old settlers or grew weary of being exploited by them. In others, relations among new settlers became intolerably fractious, causing some families to abandon the settlement where they were registered and seek a new one².

We are fortunate to have traces of peasants' own explanations in the form of petitions requesting the right to move from one parcel to another. For example, in October 1907, three peasants representing a recently settled community in Siberia's Tomsk province, addressed Her Highness Mariia Fedorovna. They had left their "dear homeland" with "hopes of improving our condition," but the parcel assigned by the Resettlement Administration had proven "less beneficial and even unsuitable." They asked for another and were quite specific about which one – "near the Gulinsk river at the site of the Nikolaev yurt." More desperate still were peasants from Vitebsk province who had settled in another district of Tomsk province on a parcel that turned out "to be without water." "Cattle and people are dying," wrote their spokesman, who reported that the petitioners intended to abandon the parcel for state land in "the Martynov ravine." Another plenipotentiary, Pavel Efimov Tsvikh, saw fit to address his petition to the tsar. His clients,

¹ For the earlier "peculiar case of the 'rock people' of the Altai, see [Znamenskii].

² Settlers who rented land from Kazakhs in the steppe region were notorious for being peripatetic, moving every year; see [Кауфман, 1897, с. 33].

ten families with over a hundred members, had settled in 1908 in yet another district of Tomsk but the parcel's swampiness and complete unsuitability for grain cultivation "forced" them to seek another section. Tsvikh claimed that both the local resettlement official and surveyor had assisted them in locating and moving to "the only available parcel in the district," but it turned out not to be available after all. Ejected from the parcel, the families were "dispersed, living in utter dependence, wherever and however" [РГИА. Ф. 391. Оп. 2. Д. 417. Л. 3, 12, 58-59]³. Like letters to authority in general, these petitions conformed in both the choice of words and their content to certain conventions, one of which undoubtedly was to exaggerate the neediness of the petitioners. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to minimize the disappointment these people must have felt after resettling, and the challenges they confronted in re-resettling.

According to the law of 13 July 1889, the state reserved the right to expel and return to their homes peasants who migrated to Siberia without permission. The law, however, was without practical application because rounding up such individuals and their families and supervising their expulsion went far beyond the state's capacities [Кауфман, 1901, с. 23]. Ironically, much of the state's campaign against irregular settlers stemmed from its assertion that they were more likely to return home than those who followed prescribed procedures⁴. That may have been, but as so often occurs with migrants, actual experience defied official categories.

As under the tsars, so in the 1920s and 1930s, higher authorities "categorically" enjoined officials on the ground to "struggle against irregular resettlers" whose actions disrupted the rational distribution of land among those from over-crowded areas.⁵ But as before, a substantial number of peasants traveled at their own initiative and bore the expenses associated with irregular resettlement.⁶ A report to the Communist Party's central committee in the mid-1930s referred to "a lot of 'unplanned settlers'... as many as planned [ones]" among families resettling from the Western oblast to Dnepropetrovsk. Another report claimed, "if the number of people refusing to go is very small, the number of those going outside planned settlement is enormous" [Трагедия советской деревни, т. 4, с. 448; РГАЭ. Ф. 5675. Оп. 1. Д. 48. Л. 28-29, 54, 73]. Some peasants desirous of resettling and apparently oblivious to the regulations defined their own terms to the Resettlement Committee. "After receiving permission to resettle," wrote the spokesman for a group of 25 householders in a communication of July

³ All three petitions were rejected by the Resettlement Administration.

⁴ For example, whereas 4.9 percent of registered settlers (amounting to 14,877 individuals) returned home in 1909, 11.9% (33,139) of irregulars returned. See: [Турчанинов, 1910, с. 20-21].

⁵ See for example the memo distributed in Samara province in 1925: [РГАЭ. Ф. 478. Оп. 7. Д. 2958. Л. 1-4].

⁶ "Almost certainly exaggerated" data from *Ekonomicheskoe obozrenie*, reports that 80 percent of the 111,000 settlers in 1924/25 were irregulars. A year later, the number of settlers "was said to have reached 120,000 of whom more than half were planned and aided" [Carr, p. 556, 558].

1935, “we will inspect the place and, finding one that we like, will inform you of its location” [РГАЭ. Ф. 5675. Оп. 1. Д. 106. Л. 34]. The remark must have struck his respondents as either inspired by ignorance or the height of insolence.

Just as some settlers relocated irrespective of state regulations, returnees included a substantial proportion who took it upon themselves to repatriate “irregularly.” Such families thereby failed to repay the loans extended to them at the time of their settlement despite state efforts – even in postwar years – to track down irregular returnees and collect on them. But as with earlier instances of irregularity, this was a battle the state could not win.⁷

Invisible Seasonal Laborers

Institutional records on seasonal migrants are notoriously sparse. Arrangements before the October Revolution between seasonal laborers from the countryside and contracting agents for large landowners, mining establishments, and even urban employers precluded the kind of record keeping that would enable us to determine how many laborers returned to their villages before fulfilling their end of the bargain. During the 1920s Soviet authorities began to replace the institutions on which seasonal laborers relied for negotiating contracts with supposedly less exploitative so-called labor correspondents. The record of their successes is patchy and they in any case were soon overtaken by the introduction of organized recruitment (*orgnabor*). This regime of seasonal migration depended on agents of the Commissariat of Labor (and after its disbandment, individual enterprises under industrial-branch commissariats) negotiating with collective farm administrators on the basis of pre-determined quotas.

In practice, employers of seasonal workers rarely reached the *orgnabor* quotas. They generally preferred to hire people who came of their own accord thereby relieving themselves of the obligation to construct housing and otherwise provide for their occasional labor force [Правда, 1931, 9 сент., с. 3; 1931, 10 сент., с. 4; 1931, 24 сент., с. 3; 1932, 16 мая, с. 2]. Thus, at the giant construction sites that would become the industrial city of Magnitogorsk, over half of the incoming population in 1931 consisted of people who arrived on their own. The region of origin for more than two-thirds of them – some 42,000 people – was listed as unknown [Правда, 1932, 12 янв.; Kotkin, p. 70, 73].⁸

Nor is it possible to say how many who left the collective farms either on their own or via *orgnabor* stayed away permanently. What is known is that these out migrants from the countryside took up one job after another with amazing frequency, some because they found the work too arduous

⁷ See materials on Aleksandr Salov and Nikolai Belousov, both of who left Kaliningrad oblast in 1947–1948: [ГАРФ. Ф. А-327. Оп. 2. Д. 475. Л. 4–10, 16–21]. For the draft resolution sent by RSFSR Council of Ministers’ chairman M. I. Rodionov to Lavrentii Beria, see: [ГАРФ. Ф. А-327. Оп. 2. Д. 610. Л. 33–34].

⁸ See also: [Filtzer, p. 61].

or the living conditions unbearable, others in search of additional income. Stephen Kotkin, in reference to such labor fluidity, observed that “the train, that ally of the Bolshevik leadership and its bureaucrats and planners, was being used against them: construction workers were using the trains to tour the country” [Kotkin, p. 85]. This was exactly what Soviet authorities feared – that migrants who “had crowded the stations and are traveling to all ends of the Soviet Union, will head for secondary construction sites, leaving Dneprostroi, Magnitostroi, and Traktorstroi without workers” [Правда, 1930, 26 марта, с. 5; 1930, 3 окт., с. 4]. Such wandering or “drift” (*samotek*) was the bad kind of seasonal employment; it made a mockery of *orgnabor*.

The Soviet Union crossed the demographic threshold to become a predominantly urban society in the early 1960s. It was then that a new term appeared referring to people who traveled far from their homes to supplement the waning rural labor force and work off the books by contracting with collective farm administrations or other rural-based enterprises. The term was *shabashniki* derived from the Russian word for Sabbath (*shabash*) but more closely corresponding to the verb *shabashnit'*, meaning “to finish work” or “to take a break from work” [Ожегов, с. 874; Толковый словарь, т. 4, стлб. 1310] *Shabashniki* were in effect the opposite of rural outmigrants. If their permanent homes were not always in cities, their destinations were almost always rural. They were by definition self-organized, traveling and working together as “on the side” or “wild” brigades. The private nature of the transactions into which they entered fundamentally violated the state’s authority to govern labor activity via the mechanism of planning. It also meant that they could be paid far more than if they went through official channels, but it seems this was fair compensation for working longer hours and taking more responsibility for their work than was normal.

But in what sense were *shabashniki* escapees? For one thing, they were almost invisible to legal authorities, unless their contracting partners saw fit to expose them. Then, sentences could be severe. In one case, a “parasite” and “swindler” received 15-years from a court in Rostov-on-Don for bilking collective and state farms. “He could do anything,” farm managers (who also were prosecuted) explained in defense of their payment of advances to him.

He went to work with his own building materials and no one had to worry about trying to obtain centrally allocated materials. [He] made deals with the head of the warehouses of... the Rostov Civil Construction Trust that enabled him to pilfer pipe, cement, crushed rock and metal from its construction projects [Правда, 1984, 5 окт., с. 6].

He got caught, but many others like him successfully cut through the multi-layered bureaucratic system. They were highly sought after by kolkhoz bosses anxious to complete projects and weary of cajoling collective farmers, but they must have irritated accountants, planners, law enforcement officers, and other elements of Soviet society responsible for checking up on what people did and at what cost they did it.

Second, resorting to work on the side for some portion of the year meant escaping from the humdrum existence captured in the Soviet saying “They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work.” We can illustrate this point by referring to the experiences of Viktor Gal’chenko. In March 1987 when “The Life of One *Shabashnik*” appeared in print, many previously taboo subjects and views long restricted to private conversations were emerging in the media, the result of Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost. “As the world is reflected in a drop of water, so the fate of this one man reveals several features characteristic of *shabashnichestvo*,” wrote the sympathetic journalist who interviewed Gal’chenko and edited his story [Гальченко, Максимова, с. 101].⁹

For the 50 days of work that Gal’chenko put in building houses near the Siberian town of Tiumen, he received 1200 rubles. This represented more than he earned in a year working as a lab technician in Novosibirsk. Plus there was the camaraderie of the brigade he formed from among his childhood companions, including his younger brother – “the healthiest collective I ever knew.” The group remained intact for several seasons, living in tents and wagons, buying and preparing food themselves like temporary workers everywhere [Piore]. The normal working day lasted 10 to 12 hours with one half day off on Saturdays. Members of the brigade lived and breathed for their work. For this reason, they shunned alcohol and avoided contact with locals. They also reverted to a state of illiteracy and inaudibility, refraining from reading newspapers or listening to the radio. The brigade found work primarily along the Enisei and Angara Rivers, and in the Saian Mountains in Siberia. “Of course, we didn’t go just to smell the taiga,” Gal’chenko pointed out, “but we also didn’t go only for the money.” They yearned for new impressions, for self-affirmation, to test their endurance, to go to the limits. The rest of the year, like Superman’s alter ego Clark Kent, they blended in with everyone else.

Wanted but not welcome in the city

We can be briefer about rural-to-urban migrants because so many of them, as we have indicated already, started out as working on a seasonal basis. The Soviet state reacted to the sheer, unprecedented volume of movement to cities in the 1930s with an aggressively restrictive regime of migration restriction. In addition to the *orgnabor* system, it introduced the internal passport, which became the legal requirement for residence in border regions and an expanding list of important cities, labeled “regime cities,” at the end of December 1932. Whereas passports in the tsarist era were distributed locally to enable peasants to move, in Soviet times they would be bestowed upon urban adults. The goal of the passport was exclusion – to keep certain kinds of people out of certain kinds of places. Nonetheless, the passport was not entirely effective as a mechanism of

⁹ The following paragraph is based on [Гальченко, Максимова].

control; that is, country people continued to find their way to the city. Many traveled as noncollectivized peasants (*edinolichniki*), not bound by kolkhoz rules, others by legally going out for temporary work, on *otkhod*. Still others obtained passports and urban registration “by informal means” after being hired at the gate by a new employer, left the collective farm without permission, or stayed on in town after military service or education [Fitzpatrick, p. 32]. Where there was a will, there were many ways, and consequently, by 1934, peasants were increasingly finding their way to cities once again, passports or no passports. Almost 12 million newcomers arrived in cities in that year, and cities showed a net gain of two to three million in 1934 and 1935 [Ibid., p. 31].

While not matching the intensity of the early 1930s, rural-to-urban migration in the post-Stalin decades (1950s–1970s) sapped thousands of villages in the central Russian oblasts of their youthful population. Their departures amounted to escaping the material deprivation and spiritual poverty of the Soviet countryside. But this is not what we have in mind when referring to escapees. More appropriate to the definition of people who ignored or willfully violated regulations limiting movement were the so-called *limitchiki*, holders of permits to reside temporarily in Moscow, Leningrad and other “regime” (restricted) cities. Like the contemporaneous *Gastarbeiter* in West Germany, many *limitchiki* found ways of overstaying their permits, confident that their employers would cooperate in masking the illegality of their continued residence [Zaslavsky, p. 144–145].¹⁰

Later still, during the turbulent years of perestroika at the end of the Soviet era, the regulations were flouted with increasing abandon. This was the period when jobs previously dominated by *limitchiki* began to go to migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus. In the 1990s, the growing presence of these migrants in the major cities of the Russian Federation echoed “new forms and degrees of ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious heterogeneity” characteristic of Western Europe [Brubaker, p. 153]. Thanks to stark inequalities of income, access to relatively cheap air and rail tickets, and lax enforcement of migration restrictions, their numbers sharply increased. Perhaps as many as three of every four resided illegally in the case of Moscow [Воробьева, Леженкина, с. 248–250].

Young specialists staying in or returning to the city

Priding itself on its rational distribution of resources, the Soviet state introduced in 1933 a system for assigning graduates of higher educational institutions to places where they were needed – rather than where they would have wanted to go. This, so it was pointed out to the young specialists, was only fair compensation to the state that had provided them with their education [Постановление ЦИК, с. 436–438]. Fair or not, some graduates

¹⁰ For another case of internal migrants widely regarded as aliens, see: [Moch].

fled their assigned posts at the earliest opportunity to return to the relative comfort of the city where they had studied. Others resorted to the ploy of fictitiously marrying an urban dweller. Still others simply refused assignments, never showed up, or went missing. *Pravda* described such people as “deserters” – this, on the eve of the Great Patriotic War [Правда, 1941, 29 марта, с. 1; 1941, 29 апр., с. 4].

Nevertheless, the same “tricks” turned up again in newspaper accounts from the postwar years. So successful were specialists in avoiding assignments that among the 54 sent by one ministry in 1962 to such “important” (but remote) districts of the country as Magadan, Chita, Tiumen’ and the Maritime krai, not one actually arrived [Правда, 1962, 20 июля, с. 3].¹¹ As of the mid-1970s, the not nearly so remote but nonetheless rural Non-Black Earth region’s need for 200,000 agricultural specialists went only half met [Денисова, с. 53]. Many who agreed to serve for the requisite two years “did not linger.” Huge tasks, long working hours, low pay, and the lack of creature comforts sent them back to the city. They probably would not have been able to get away with their desertion without the collaboration of urban-based institutes willing to claim a need for their freshly minted expertise.

Refugees and self-evacuees

With refugees we encounter a category of migrants that by its very nature involved escape – from the danger of “collateral damage” or falling into enemy hands. But among refugees were large numbers – distressingly large from the standpoint of authorities responsible for transporting, feeding and accommodating them – who escaped from authorities’ ministrations and calculations. As the historian Gennadii Kornilov notes with respect to refugees during World War I, “these migrations were largely spontaneous and disorganized, so that in a majority of cases it was impossible to register origins, numbers and destinations of displaced persons” [Kornilov, p. 156]. Likewise during the Civil War and succeeding famine years, it becomes impossible to keep track of the numbers of refugees, their peregrinations, and even the causes of their displacement. Did they take to the road to evade impressment into Red and White armies, locate lost family members, stave off hunger, or return to their homes abandoned during the Great War? The sources contain evidence of all these itineraries, but they are incomplete, more so than for any other period. Their incompleteness was a function of the unusual haphazardness of data collection, the frequency with which territories changed hands, and the elusiveness of the refugees themselves.¹² One

¹¹ See also: [Правда, 1954, 23 июня, с. 2; Болдырев, с. 27; Правда, 1958, 11 июня, с. 1].

¹² For a history of everyday life in the Urals as catastrophe, И. Narskii, who notes that the “weakness of state services and the extraordinary scale of the human catastrophe was reflected... in the imprecision and lack of coordination of data by which the authorities operated” [Нарский, с. 128].

could have fled the advancing enemy in 1914–1915, settled in the interior for a couple of years only to have had to pick up stakes again because of armed conflict within Russia and then once more owing to the Mid-Volga-based famine in 1921–1922.¹³

Immediately after the after the Nazi invasion of June 1941, the Soviet government, determined to avoid the chaos of refugee flight that occurred during World War I, set up an extensive system of evacuation councils. Nevertheless, many evacuees assigned to a particular destination wound up somewhere else – either through their own doing or because of what frustrated higher authorities referred to as “irregular” (*samovol'nye*) reassignments by regional personnel. Counting on the strategy of family connections, some evacuees reportedly insisted on being deposited at places where they claimed to have relatives rather than proceeding on to the Altai or Novosibirsk even when it turned out they did not have any relatives where they claimed they did. One instance of irregular reassignments occurred in January 1942 when Sverdlovsk oblast officials “readdressed” a convoy of 750 Leningraders to Omsk in southwest Siberia; it happened again when authorities in Omsk readdressed the same convoy to Petropavlovsk 150 miles away in northern Kazakhstan [ГАРФ. Ф. А-327. Оп. 2. Д. 68. Л. 15; Оп. 2. Д. 50. Л. 33, 103–106].

Urbanites who had been evacuated eastward were especially eager to return home in this country where an urban place of residence was privileged and conditions outside cities were generally grim. None outdid Muscovites, seized by “suitcase moods” early on, as denizens of the most privileged city [Manley, p. 240].¹⁴ Already in December 1941, after the worst of the battle for the capital city was over, some started on the return journey despite the fact that the railroad administration was forbidden to issue tickets. Evacuation officials in the central Russian town of Penza reported in January 1942 that Muscovites had heard from relatives they could come home, and so they filled the stations. Without permission, came a report from Riazan', a thousand people showed up at the railroad station every day trying to get to Moscow, 125 miles away. Other reports came from cities both near and far [ГАРФ. Ф. А-327. Оп. 2. Д. 68. Л. 10, 13].

¹³ The paucity of reliable data raises a question that speaks to the discursive nature of “refugee.” It had opposite connotations: carriers of panic and disease on the one hand, helpless victims on the other. See: [Gatrell, p. 14, 29]. Who gets to designate someone as a refugee? Is displacement from one’s home with no immediate prospect of returning sufficient? Or does it require some state or non-governmental authority to identify the refugee and treat him or her accordingly? But what if authorities failed to see displaced people as refugees, either because of their capacity for blending in, or because authority lacked interest in seeing them? For the argument that, decades before UN definitions, co-nationals heading and participating in relief agencies “saw” refugees better than Russian authorities and relief agencies, and sought to redeem them as part of nation-building projects, see: [Homelands].

¹⁴ According to G. A. Kumanev, 46 of the 65 resolutions about re-evacuation that the State Defense Committee and the USSR Council of People’s Commissars adopted between January 3 and March 9, 1942 concerned Moscow. See: [Куманев, т. 2, с. 77].

Fugitives from exile and deportation

In 1900, Lev Davidovich Bronshtein, who would become known as Leon Trotsky, started serving a sentence of 4 years' exile in Eastern Siberia with fellow leaders of the South Russian Workers Union. Thanks to sympathetic peasants and friends he escaped in 1902 [Trotsky, p. 123-125; Deutscher, 1965, p. 55]. Seven years later, Trotsky received the more severe penalty of exile in perpetuity to a settlement near the mouth of the Ob River within the Arctic Circle. The destination – a thousand miles from the nearest railroad with spotty postal communication – was sufficiently foreboding to inspire escape. Informed by knowledgeable locals, he took off due west over roadless terrain to arrive at a rail connection in the Urals, and thence to St. Petersburg [Trotsky, p. 190-197]. Josef Stalin's carceral travels included exile north of Irkutsk in 1903; deportation to a little settlement in Northern Vologda in 1908, a return visit in 1910 to the same hellhole; and then in 1913 consignment to northern Siberia. From each of these places, Stalin escaped [Deutscher, 1972, p. 56-58, 102-103, 108-111].

Exiles and deportees also tried to escape under Stalin, and some of them succeeded. After 1931, even though substantial numbers of forced migrants would continue to arrive in the special settlements, the population of the settlements declined from one year to the next. The excess of deaths over births – an average of 78,000 for the years 1932-1934 – explains only some of the decline. After 1934, recorded births actually exceeded deaths for each year of the remainder of the decade. Transfers of minors and the elderly to relatives back home, the provision after 1938 of passports to enable those reaching the age of 16 to work and study elsewhere, and other ameliorative acts contributed. But far more significant was the excess of escapees over those caught and returned – nearly 125,000 on average during 1932-1934 [Земсков, с. 20-21, 71-72].¹⁵

The extraordinary extent of flight – over half a million people during the years 1932-1934, or about one in six of all special settlers – hints at the intolerable conditions in the settlements.¹⁶ It also implies that escape was not that difficult. As in the case of Siberian exiles during the tsarist era, authorities counted on the settlements' isolation rather than carceral structures or the presence of guards to deter runaways. But so determined were many of the condemned not to succumb to the state's coercive migration regime that they drew on their own repertoires.

People escaped from the special settlements early and often. They escaped individually and in groups. Able-bodied young people predominated among escapees. Some who were caught and sent into exile a second time found a way to escape again. According to one report from the assistant

¹⁵ The figures for returned runaways include those who "returned voluntarily" as well as those who were caught. Although after 1937 returned runaways actually exceeded those escaping, the numbers were relatively small and the differences slight.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the settlements' living conditions and their gradual improvement during the 1930s see: [Славко, с. 88-114; Климин, с. 426-449].

director of the OGPU in the Urals, kulaks intending to escape obtained false documents from relatives and the local population, or fashioned them themselves, forging the signatures of commandants [Политбюро и крестьянство, т. 2, с. 943].¹⁷ “The flight of kulaks is our main scourge,” admitted Rudolf Austrin, the head of the OGPU in the Northern krai, in a report from September 1930. Figures from October show that more than 29,000 had escaped from settlements in his region, although more than half had been caught. This was a significantly higher rate of apprehensions than in Western Siberia where of 12,000 runaways only 30 percent were caught. In some districts, one almost wonders why anyone remained in the settlements at all. Of the nearly 9000 people who had arrived in the spring of 1930 in one police district about 250 miles northeast of Omsk, only 1246 were left by August. So unpopular was the Narym territory, some 250 miles up the Ob River from Tomsk, that 23,400 of the 28,400 sent there had escaped by the autumn of 1930. The OGPU offered bounties to informers and punished escapees with penalties up to confinement in labor camps, but the hemorrhaging remained heavy until conditions in the settlements improved toward the middle of the decade [Климин, с. 530-545; Красильников, с. 161, 163; Политбюро и крестьянство, т. 2, с. 551-553].¹⁸

Where did they go? In most cases it is not possible to answer this question because runaways tried to avoid detection by authorities, and we depend heavily on official sources. Heavily, but fortunately not entirely. In recent years, individuals and civic societies have published accounts of deportees who escaped and survived. Among them is Tat'iana Timofeevna Malakhveeva whose odyssey back to her village in Voronezh oblast followed four years of exile in the North. Only sixteen, Tat'iana traveled alone through the taiga covering hundreds of miles on foot and by boat. Reaching Kotlas, she was approached by two policemen on the docks. She grabbed her knapsack and fled. When she returned to the harbor, they were gone, and she boarded a steamer for Vologda, 300 miles to the southwest. Although the police did not check documents at embarkation, they did during the journey. Tat'iana leapt from the upper to lower deck, hiding among the ship's cargo and then in the toilet until the coast was clear. Her luck seemed to run out in Vologda, though. Seized by the authorities, she was taken to an orphanage. Fortunately for her, it only accepted small children. She once again escaped the clutches of the police, bought a ticket on the train to Moscow, and again hid in the toilet to avoid the authorities. In Moscow she spent a night sleeping on a park bench – it was August – then took a train to Riazan'. Her money ran out, but two peasant women gave her the necessary amount for a ticket to Voronezh; after another night on another bench, and the

¹⁷ The report was from August 1930.

¹⁸ Klimin argues that the figures for runaways are likely to be lower than the true numbers because commandants whose reports are the main sources had an incentive to underreport escapes.

intercession of a kindly cashier, she boarded the train, the last leg of her journey [Пути следования, с. 61-73].

Mikhail Akimov wanted to go home too, but did not succeed. His is a story of the long-term, adverse consequences of defying the special settler regime. Exiled in 1931 from Rostov oblast to a special settlement in the Urals, nineteen-year-old Mikhail worked with his father Artëm at logging. In 1933 both his father and mother Dar'ia died. Alone, he escaped from the settlement in January 1934, "because," as he later told the authorities, "I wanted to go home, as I had received a letter [telling me] that things were good at home and I would be accepted into the kolkhoz." He made it to a town north of Perm, from where he took a train to Sverdlovsk, winding up in a village south of the city. He "escaped again" (from what is not clear) but was caught at a railroad station almost 200 miles south of Sverdlovsk. All in all, he had been on the run for three months [Бердинских, с. 244-247].¹⁹

Topophilia - the pull of home - is undeniable in these accounts as it is in the case of N. N. Pavlov from Belorussia. Deported to a special settlement in Sverdlovsk oblast with his parents, he traveled from one village to another within the region of his family's confinement begging and doing odd jobs. He sometimes heard people singing "pessimistic songs" such as the one with the words:

Стороны родной лиши
 За крестьянский труд честной.
 Ох, умру, похоронят меня,
 И родные не узнают,
 Где могилка моя (цит. по: [Славко, с. 156-157]).²⁰

But Pavlov's parents did not want their youngest child to die far from home and so arranged for him to escape with a woman who had been deported from a village a mere four miles from his own. Because "patrols operated at all the train stations of the northern railroads" to catch runaways, the two escapees chose a southern route. They hired a coachman to drive them to Tiumen', a distance of about 75 miles. From there they headed by train not west but east toward Omsk; only after reaching that city did they turn west, passing through Kurgan, Cheliabinsk, Ufa, and Kuibyshev. Their money eventually ran out and so they took to begging. Upon reaching the city of Bobruisk in Belorussia, less than 45 miles from home, Pavlov's traveling companion abandoned him, claiming his parents had not given her enough money. For a while, he carried luggage for railroad passengers to earn enough to hire a driver. With still some 12 miles to go, the driver learned where he had been and why, and drove him the rest of the way for nothing [Славко, с. 157].

¹⁹ Mikhail Akimov was freed from the special settlement in 1947.

²⁰ The song, "Akh, ty, dolia moia, dolia," is attributed to Sergei Sinegub, a revolutionary populist who went to the people in 1874 as part of the Chaikovskii movement. For three variants, see: [Ах ты, доля моя, доля...].

As for the Gulag, contrary to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's claim that escape was "an enterprise for giants among men – but for doomed giants," escapees numbered in the tens of thousands every year for several years, and many of them succeeded in eluding capture. In 1933 the Gulag logged nearly 46,000 people as having escaped of whom 38 percent got away for good. The following year, 1934, was an all-time high, with the NKVD reporting over 83,000 escapees. Thereafter, even as the camp population swelled, the number escaping tailed off, suggesting not improved conditions as in the case of the special settlements, but rather an increasingly strict regimen that made escapes harder to pull off and successful ones rarer still. By 1941, escapes were down to about 10,500 [Solzhenitsyn, p. 97; Applebaum, p. 393-394; Barnes, p. 139; Khlevniuk, p. 308]. Their numbers dropped further still during the war. Postwar fugitives, some of whom had been toughened for escape by service in the Soviet armed forces and time in German POW camps, had greater success remaining at large – in 1947, for example, nearly three-quarters got away [Applebaum, p. 395; Solzhenitsyn, p. 126, 193-194].

* * *

Escapees from state regulations and carceral institutions were the inevitable result of state officials' attempts to control movement within the vastness of the Eurasian continent. The more ambitious the state became in prescribing and proscribing migrations, the more likely it was to provoke evasive action. The ambitiousness of the state – both tsarist and Soviet – stemmed from two sources: a paternalistic assumption of responsibility for its subjects/citizens who otherwise could not rationally utilize resources necessary for their and the state's well-being; and a heightened sense of insecurity toward the loyalties of its subjects/citizens, particularly those with cross-border ties. The mass deportations by Imperial Russian forces of Jews, Germans, and Poles into the interior of the empire during World War I thus reflected the same impulse as evident in the expulsion of Circassians as hostile elements from areas bordering on the Ottoman Empire during the 1860s and 1870s. It presaged deportations both beyond Soviet borders and into relatively inhospitable parts of the country of "class alien elements" and diasporic nationalities during the 1930s and 1940s.

What could account for the substantial numbers and persistence of people defying the state's rules governing mobility, other than their inconvenience or onerousness? For one thing, the limited capacity of the state to prevent them. Working through the records of the tsarist and Soviet Resettlement Administrations, the Evacuation Council, or the NKVD's officials responsible for deportations conveys a palpable sense of emergency, overwork, and a shortage of resources. Many people consequently fell through the cracks. The other factor is the vastness of the country, which compounded difficulties in communications and transportation among different state agencies as well as their ability to patrol territories inhabited by migrants (including those escaping from confinement). In some ways, space and the sparseness of population was an ally of the state as it developed and applied migration regimes; in others, it was an enemy.

Finally, what are the implications for our finding that “escapees populated Russia’s twentieth century in astonishingly large numbers?” The most obvious is that perhaps assumptions about people’s powerlessness in the face of overwhelming state power needs to be rethought. Sometimes, individuals could take it upon themselves to desert from the army or escape from a special settlement. But far more often actions such as these, as well as choosing where and when to settle, contracting with an employer, and re-evacuating without permission to do so required “relationships and networks of contact” among members of families, kin, and occupational cohorts. As state authorities sought to coordinate, and control human mobility, they more than met their match in the artful dodgers and their friends.

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