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***From Rebels to Refugees: Experiencing Displacement in the Aftermath of the Revolt of 1916
in Central Asia***

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Research Abstract:

My project, *From Rebels to Refugees: Experiencing Displacement in the Aftermath of the Revolt of 1916 in Central Asia*, examines the revolt as an experience in displacement and addressed its implications for the developments in the region during the early-Soviet period. It analyzes the reality of displacement and poses questions regarding the refugees' survival and daily existence in the Chinese territories, as well as the circumstances of their displacement. It aims to move beyond the view of displacement as a human tragedy and concentrates instead on its social aspect that is, displacement as a lived experience.

Through close examination of memoirs, oral poetry, political speeches, state laws, and newspaper articles related to the revolt of 1916, I argue that forced displacement experienced by the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz in the aftermath of the revolt became an integral part of their identity. Furthermore, preserving the memory of this displacement in poems and stories brought a sense of unity and belonging for the community as a whole. My project also investigates the state response, both Chinese and Russian, to the refugee crisis and highlights the efforts of the Central Asian national cultural and political elites to relieve this crisis. Ultimately, my research demonstrates how we can integrate the history of Central Asian refugees into the historiography of refugeedom and places the refugee crisis following the revolt within the broader context of the population movement resulting from World War I.

Research Goals:

The purpose of my research was to locate primary and secondary sources in the libraries and archives of the Kyrgyz Republic to support my research on the revolt of 1916 as an experience in displacement. I was interested in how the historical sources tell the story of the refugees and their experiences. The goal of my research, on the one hand, was to analyze the reality of displacement as it is told by the official documentation in form of state laws, memos, statutes, and speeches of the political actors of the time left in the state archives. I was also interested in exploring displacement as a lived experience from the point of view of the participants of the revolt who later escaped to China. My next goal, thus, was to investigate how displacement was remembered and memorialized in Kyrgyz oral poetry, works of literature, and art following the revolt.

Research Activities:

I arrived to Bishkek in July of 2016. After a week of adjustment to local time and climate (temperatures were in the upper 90s, quite a change from cooler Seattle weather), I went straight to the Central State Archive of the Kyrgyz Republic (TsGA KR) in Bishkek. Getting an access to the archive materials was not as difficult as I thought it would be; all I needed was my passport and a letter (*otnoshenie*) from American Councils explaining the goal of my visit. In this archive, I have mainly worked on the collection no. 75, *The Revolt of 1916*, and other related materials. The archive staff at the TsGA KR was quite accommodating and helpful since I had a history of working with them during my previous visits. Archival files ordered for viewing arrived in a timely manner, i.e. files ordered in the morning, usually arrived by noon of the same day. The

archive had a spacious reading room and it was possible to make some copies of the files upon obtaining the approval of the Assistant Director of the archive.

I worked in the TsGA KR until mid-August and then left for the city of Karakol, which is located on the eastern end of the lake Isyk Kul. Before the collapse of the Russian empire in 1917, Karakol (Przheval'sk) was the administrative center of the Przheval'sk uezd of the Semirech'e oblast'. One of the largest and most violent protests against the Russian colonial rule took place precisely in this colonial town and its surroundings. Here, I discovered the remnants of the Sviato-Troitskii monastery, an old wooden Russian Orthodox monastery, in the village of Ak Bulung (former Preobrazhenskoe), and find an island where the priests of the monastery and the Slavic settlers took refuge during the mass Kyrgyz protests.

In Karakol, I also visited the State Archive of the Isyk Kul Region. Although its collection is much smaller than the TsGA's, it still hosts some valuable documents pertaining to the revolt itself and early-Soviet state efforts to relieve the refuge crisis in its aftermath. The staff in the archive was also friendly and eager to help. I was the only researcher there and the documents I ordered arrived usually within 15 to 30 minutes. The only drawback was the absence of a special reading room for researchers and I had to share a room with the archive staff. Still, I had quite a pleasant experience in this archive and would recommend it to anyone working on Soviet history.

One of the most valuable collections in this archive are the personal files of Khusein Karasaev, one of the eye-witnesses of the revolt of 1916. Born in 1902, Karasaev lived through the Russian colonial and Soviet periods and became a well-known linguist and a specialist of Turkic studies. He had a long life and career and left behind a tremendous amount of papers (articles, poems, collections of oral literature, and memoirs). Karasaev's memoirs (over 400

pages long) covering the first twenty years of his life contain some vivid scenes from the lives of the Kyrgyz before the collapse of the Russian empire, and overall, they are an important source for someone studying Central Asian history.

In September, I continued to work at the TsGA KR. This time I examined the archival collections from the early Soviet period, such as the collection no. 20, *Executive Council of the Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast*; no. 2, *TsIK of the Kyrgyz ASSR*; no. 23, *Council of the People's Commissars of the Kyrgyz ASSR*; and no. 89 *Pishpek Uezd's Executive Committee*.

I was also able to find, in this archive, early-Soviet periodical literature in Kyrgyz and Russian languages which contained short pieces on the revolt and the condition of the rebels-turned-refugees and Slavic settlers in Semirech'e region of Turkestan.

I spent the last two weeks of my research at the Manuscripts Collections of the National Academy of Sciences (RFNAN KR) in Bishkek. In addition to the poems of such Kyrgyz poets as, Abylkasym Zhutakeev, Isak Shaibekov, Aldash Moldo, and Taghai Emilov written on the theme of the revolt, I found the memoirs of the participants of the revolt in prose that were collected in the 1950s by the researchers of the Academy of Sciences. There is also a considerable amount of material on the revolt collected from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan (former TsGA UzSSR) by the scholars of the Academy in the late 1950s and 60s. This material was especially crucial for my research since getting access to the archives in Uzbekistan today is nearly impossible.

Important Research Findings:

On the sources: Among the sources that reveal the lives of the refugees are the poems, composed by the Kyrgyz and Kazakh poets, during or shortly after the revolt which were

recorded from the mid-1920s to the early-1930s, during the oral literature campaign of the Academic Center of Kara Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast, but remained unpublished until the 1990s. These poems provide an opportunity to see the revolt from the point of view of the participants. Most of the archival sources on the revolt were left by people in power, who were capable of recording their side of the story. Some Kyrgyz and Kazakhs do appear in the colonial archives, but usually only in interrogation materials and witness testimonies. Forced to testify under pressure and through an interpreter, these informants had little opportunity to convey their own emotional and perceptual experiences of the revolt. The poems of the Kyrgyz *aqyns* represent an important tool to address such limitations.

In Kyrgyz popular memory, the revolt came to be called the *ürkiin*, a word normally indicating the commotion caused by being suddenly startled. Poems on the revolt of 1916 came to constitute a special genre in the Kyrgyz literary history, known under the name *ürkiin yrlary*, or the songs of the *ürkiin*. Most of the *aqyns* who composed on the theme of the revolt were born in the 1870s and 1880s in Pishpek and Przheval'sk *uezds* of southern Semirech'e *oblast*, and were in their mid-thirties or early-forties during the revolt. They all had *mekteb* education and generally went on to become teachers. This group of poets escaped persecution in the 1930s, and most of them lived into the 1950s. Some even benefitted from state patronage, and served as messengers of socialist ideas and advocates for the Soviet way of life.

Some of the most important findings for me came in form of unpublished poems on the revolt written by Aktan Tynybekov, Mataaly Toksobaev and others in 1927. The poems are written in Kyrgyz language using the Arabic script. Some of them were later (1937?) transcribed into Cyrillic. The poems on the revolt follow a standard script. They began with the announcement of the labour conscription order and the people's reaction to it. Next they

described episodes from the revolt. Finally, they included a section on the Kyrgyz flight to China, the difficulties they endured on their way to China, and their return. I am still sorting through these works and transcribing the ones that are in Arabic script.

On space: My trip from Cholpon Ata to Karakol was an important part of my research trip. I drove through the small towns and villages that witnessed one of the bloodiest and most violent clashes during the revolt. The population of the villages along the main road during the Soviet period was mainly Russian. Thus, one could still find traces of their life in those villages in the architectural details of the houses, presence of small churches, and Orthodox Christian cemeteries. One of the highlights of my trip was my visit to the village Ak Bulung where I found a building which once was part of the Sviato-Troitskii monastery. Since then, I have begun researching the history of this monastery in relation to a source I found at the Central State Archive of the Kyrgyz Republic in Bishkek, and presented a paper based on my preliminary research at the Central Eurasian Studies Society's annual conference at Princeton University in November of 2016.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

The revolt of 1916 remains a highly politicized and contentious issue between the Russian and Central Asian (especially Kyrgyz and Kazakh) historians and politicians. While Russian historians try to diminish the revolt's significance in the history of the Russian empire and frame the revolt within the concept of the 'general tragedy,'¹ their Kyrgyz colleagues stress the violence, trauma, and devastation Kyrgyz suffered at the hands of the Slavic settlers and the Russian punitive army in the aftermath of the revolt. There is also a small group of Kyrgyz

¹ This was at least the view of the scholars from the Russian Academy of Sciences who attended a conference on the revolt of 1916 which took place in Bishkek in May of 2016.

political activists headed by Azimbek Beknazarov, a member of the state commission to review the history of the Kyrgyz flight to China, who push Russia to recognize *Ürkün* as a genocide.

In a multi-ethnic country, where the memory of the 1991 and 2010 violent confrontations between the ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan is still fresh in people's minds, these kinds of declarations might bring devastating results. Instead of politicizing the revolt and viewing it through the nationalist standpoint, as historians, it is more important to pose questions on the seemingly mundane details of the revolt and displacement in its aftermath. Asking questions about the everyday living conditions of the refugees in a foreign country, the refugee crisis and its relief, and the political circumstances of the refugees' return, and putting the revolt in historical perspective will provide us with tools to understand the challenges we face today as a result of regional conflicts and wars. Answers to these questions can be applied by politicians to many cases of displacement today within and outside Central Asia and parallels in different geographic and temporal contexts can be drawn from the answers themselves.

Co-Curricular Activity:

While in Bishkek, I met with scholars at the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University. I discussed a possibility for future collaboration with Muratbek Kozhobekov, Associate Professor at the Department of History. He is conducting a research on the life and works of Osmonaaly Sydykov, the first modern Kyrgyz historian who fled to China in the late 1910s and lived there until his death in 1942. We do not have much information about Sydykov's scholarly activities in China, although his daughter, who returned to Kyrgyzstan in 1956, relates that much of his works are preserved in the archives in Ürümqi, China. Mr. Kozhobekov and I plan to write a research proposal together to fund our research trip to Ürümqi.

I also met with Osmonakun Ibraimov, a former Secretary of State of the Kyrgyz Republic, who teaches modern Kyrgyz literature at the Manas University. We had a long discussion about the Kyrgyz literature of the early-Soviet period. Professor Ibraimov expressed his interest to participate at the Central Eurasian Studies Society's annual conference in 2017 with a paper on Kyrgyz oral poets of the late-imperial period.

Conclusions:

I had a very productive research trip to Kyrgyzstan. I met with local researchers and students. I did not have any problems in locating and obtaining any of the archival materials. The staff at the archives (both State and the Manuscripts Collection) was very friendly and eager to help. During my free time, I attended some lectures and presentations at the University of Central Asia (for example, *Musical Geographies: Shared Musical Styles and Sensibilities Across Political Boundaries in the Pamir Mountains*, by Chorshanbe Goibnazarov, a PhD Candidate at Berlin Graduate School of Muslim Cultures and Societies, Berlin, Germany, and Wajahat Shah, a music student of Lahore's National College of Arts in Pakistan). I visited several bookstores in Bishkek and Karakol and bought some monographs pertaining to my own research. Finally, I visited the Art Museum (unfortunately, the History Museum was closed for renovations during my trip) and the Museum of Literature in Bishkek and found some useful materials pertaining to my research.

The Second World Nomad Games took place at the shores of lake Isyk Kul while I was in Kyrgyzstan. I visited a summer pasture Kyrchyn, a stage for the majority of the nomadic games, just a few days before the official opening of the Games and enjoyed its full beauty before the arrival of the crowd. And, although I was not able to attend the Games personally, I

closely followed it on TV and enjoyed various programs on nomadic culture and history that were put together as part of the Games. Overall, I had a great trip that enriched me as a human being and a scholar.

American Councils staff was very attentive and generous with their time. I especially would like to thank Sarah Krueger for working with me closely in creating my itinerary and taking care of all the visa related issues. She was always available to answer my questions before, during, and after the trip. I also would like to thank the staff in Bishkek office for assisting me in extending my visa. Finally, my research trip was possible because of the Title VIII Research Scholar Fellowship. I am truly grateful to the American Councils and the Fellowship Committee for giving me a chance to conduct research in Kyrgyzstan. It was crucial for me to receive the Fellowship at a very early stage of my academic career - it helped me formulate and advance my research project tremendously.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/Presentations and Publications:

1. Submitted an article, "From Rebels to Refugees: Experiencing Displacement in the Aftermath of the Revolt of 1916," to be published in a collective volume on the revolt of 1916, *The Central Asian Revolt of 1916: Rethinking the History of a Collapsing Empire in the Age of War and Revolution* (Aminat Chokobaeva, Cloe Drieu, Alexander Morrison (eds.)). The publication proposal is currently under review with Manchester University Press's *Cultural History of Modern War Series*.
2. Presented a paper, *A Diary of a Priest: New Voices on the Revolt of 1916 in Central Asia*, at the Central Eurasian Studies Society's 17th annual conference in Princeton University,

NJ (3-6 November, 2016). I incorporated some of the archival findings from my research trip funded by American Councils' Title VIII Research Scholar Program.

3. In spring of 2017, I will be teaching a seminar on the history of the Russian empire and Central Asia at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, WA. I will dedicate a session of the seminar to the revolt of 1916 and its implications for the socio-political and economic developments in Central Asia and Russia in the early-Soviet period. I will also discuss the memory of the revolt from the perspective of the rebels and the Slavic settlers.
4. Finally, I plan on incorporating the results of my research in my future seminar on displacement and migration in Russia and the Soviet Union.

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