

## “From the Chechen People:” Anti-Soviet Protest 1944-1946

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Map of spetskomendatory and special settler distribution from Akmolinsk, Kazakh SSR, 1955

On the 60th anniversary of the deportation of the Chechen people it is important to reflect on the period *after* February 23, 1944, and on the resistance to the Soviet state that the Chechens put up in exile. The Chechens were unique among the people and nations who were deported and imprisoned under Stalin, and indeed among the many victims of totalitarian regimes and of attempted genocide during the 20th century. They faced their fate with exceptional resolve, refusing to accommodate the Soviet state on many key issues, even if this demanded a terrifying kind of discipline and came at a great cost to many families and individuals. It is significant and particularly appropriate that hundreds of people worldwide are fasting on this anniversary. Hunger was the first feeling of which the uprooted people became conscious, and it stayed with them for long months and years after. It is even more significant that the fasting and memorial actions are connected to the call for international involvement in Chechnya. Among the deported Chechens the belief that “England and America” would come to their aid was widespread. The NKVD and police in the exile settlements recorded numerous statements to the effect that the English or Americans would soon destroy Soviet power, or at least help the deported people reestablish their republic in the Caucasus. In 2004, sixty years later, it seems more important than ever to draw attention to this pervasive belief of the 1940s.

I have before me documents about the Chechen “special settlers” (*spetsposelentsy*) from *fond* 9479 of the Russian State Archive in Moscow. This archival *fond* contains the records of the 4<sup>th</sup> Special Section of the NKVD, a separate police force set up to deal with the deported people. The most basic and bitter aspect of the deportation that these records document, with their fold-out maps of hundreds of new *spetskomendatory* and graphs and statistics about the “shipment” and “dislocation”

of “families” and their members (tellingly two *separate* categories!), is how widely the deportees were dispersed in Central Asia - how deeply the nation, teips, families were initially torn apart. To give an example of this, this table found in the report gives the “regional distribution” of Chechens, Ingush, and Balkars arriving in the Kirgiz Republic between March 5 and March 21, 1944. The ethnic “distribution” of this now unrecognizable mass of “chel.” (the Russian abbreviation for “chelovek,” “person”) is Chechens and Ingush – 20,596 families, 88,281 “chel.,” Balkars – 3,803 families, 16,364 “chel.”

[“Regional Distribution of Eshelons , March 5-March 21, 1944 – Kirgiz SSR”]<sup>1</sup>

Oblast’	Number of eshelons	Number of families	Number of individuals	Men	Women	Children
Frunze region	15	9601	40,145	9,337	11,348	19,450
Osh	13	8,016	35,078	7,749	9,909	17,420
Dzhalal-Abad	10	6,133	26,711	5,449	6,638	14,724
Issyk-Kul	1	649	2721	506	957	1258
Total	39	24,399	104,645	23,041	28,852	52,752

The exiles arrived at their destinations in an extremely weakened condition. An elderly Kazak man reluctantly told me a little of what the documents do not reveal about this moment, what he saw when as a youth of age sixteen, trembling with fear, he was sent to stand guard over a transport of deported Chechens destined for the village Zhangys-Kuduk, in the Akmolinsk region. *“There was great noise, screams. People didn’t recognize each other and got lost, family members had been sent in a different car. They looked terrible, like prisoners. They had nothing with them, except for their clothes.”*<sup>2</sup> NKVD troops and local helpers divided the exiles and sent them to the districts in small groups of 2-30 families.

Hunger was the first thing that the Chechens encountered in Kazakhstan and Kirgistan. I will focus on the evidence from a key document on the deportation to Kirgistan, a comprehensive report on the arrival and distribution of the “special settlers” sent to NKVD chief Lavrentii Beria, the deportation’s architect, on April 4, 1944. The last section of the document discusses political “moods” and “anti-soviet incidents” among the special settlers.”<sup>3</sup>

*Since the arrival of the special settlers in the regions (oblasts’) of the Kirgiz SSR the following anti-soviet and other incidents have taken place. The chairman of the district executive committee [of the district soviet] of Kirov district, Frunze region, received a group statement from 40 Chechen special settler families, which in the form of harshly expressed anti-soviet protest has the following content:*

*“From the Chechen people. I ask you not to ignore our request because they sent us here to Kirgizia on 23 February 1944, our people are dying, up to the present day more than 30 people are starving,*

<sup>1</sup> GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 176, ll. 197-202, April 4, 1944, ‘O prieme I rasselenii spetspereselentsev: chechentsev, ingushei i balkartsev v Kirgizskoi SSR.’

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous interview, village Zhangys-Kuduk, Akmola region, Kazakstan, July 14, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 176, l. 201.

*the others lie without strength, we left behind in every household from 3-5 cows and 40-50 sheep, a lot of grain, we took nothing with us, if the state won't help us, we're already a lost people, if you won't give us help, I ask you to shoot all of us together with our families."*

May the souls of these people rest in true peace! What happened next is unknown. The report moves on without comment to more "anti-Soviet and other incidents." Most of them were straightforward theft of cows and calves, except for the following cases, even more heartbreaking:

*On 15 March 1944, in the village Leninpol', Leninpol' district, Frunze region, the Chechen special settlers Ibragimov, Mallad, b. 1924 and Khazatov, Abdulai entered the flat of citizen Sargibaeva, drank 2 litres of milk and fled.*

*The criminals were caught due to the measures taken, an investigation is being carried out. [...]*

*In Stalin district, Frunze region, a group of Chechen special settlers of 10 people broke into the Milk-product Farm at night and began to start the milking of cows. After noise was raised by the farm guards and after the arrival of the collective farmers, the special settlers ran away, hitting one of the collective farmers in the process.*

*In the same district, in the Stalin Collective Farm cut off one ear each from 8 steers. The group of criminals was arrested, an investigation is being carried out.*

What could the investigations possibly reveal? The total physical exhaustion of the Chechens, a famine stricken people, caught in a far-away icy land in a nightmare in which milking cows was an "anti-Soviet incident"! Desperate people *drank milk and fled* (!), and the authorities were worried about their capacity to make "anti-Soviet protest" statements!

The memoirs of Aza Bazorkina show that for months "entire families went about pale and with swollen bellies, searching for animal carcasses in the steppe," and once the snow melted, for wild onions and garlic and various grasses to sustain themselves. Many of the grasses were indigestible and caused diarrhea and dehydration. She also notes that very few people resorted to begging but that some stole sheep and chickens to survive.<sup>4</sup> Kazak and Kirgiz party officials were alarmed by the settlers' "physical depletion." Special food allotments authorized in January 1945 (nearly a year after the deportation!!) amounted to a daily ration of 100 grams of wheat flour and 25 grams of semolina flour. It is unclear how much even of this actually reached the deportees. Even if some of it did, Kazak government officials knew that "in the absence of any additional sources of food products whatsoever, this is obviously insufficient to ensure the survival and support of completely exhausted people." They repeatedly applied to the leadership in Moscow for help in the form of additional assignments of food, seed grain, and textiles,<sup>5</sup> but oral testimonies reveal that hunger and famine conditions were constant until about 1948 or 1949.<sup>6</sup>

Getting any kind of job in the collective farms meant the difference between life and death. Not only did such employment bring with it the allotment of a garden plot and of provisions by the farm administration, it meant that one sometimes had direct and unsupervised access to vegetable

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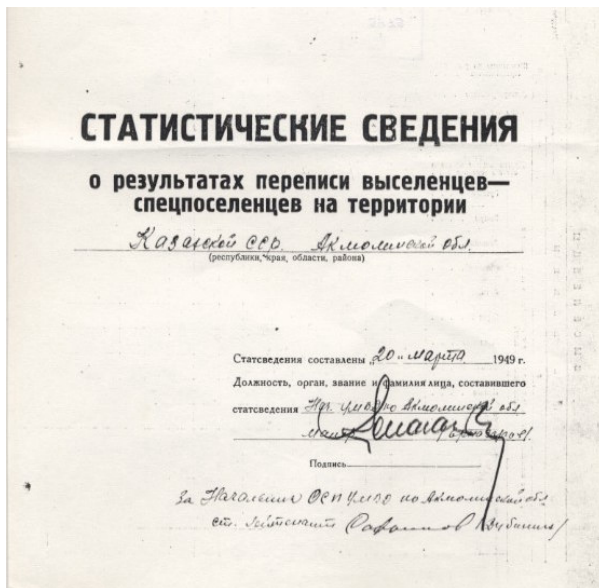
<sup>4</sup> Aza Bazorkina, "Terpenie," in Alieva, op cit, pp 114-115.

<sup>5</sup> GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 153, ll. 18-19, January 1945, "Po voprosu okazaniia prodovol'stvennoi pomoshchi spetspereselentsam s Severnogo Kavkaza i Gruzinskoi SSR."

<sup>6</sup> Interviews in Akmola region, June-July 2000.

gardens, cow's milk, and occasionally meat.<sup>7</sup> However, in the first years many of the Chechens could not or would not work for the state that had sent them away from their homes to die. They refused to work for farm bosses and local party secretaries, backed up by the “special regime,” who treated the Chechens with contempt and occasionally outright hatred. The frequency with which such cases appear in the documents makes it clear that Chechens suffered far more in this respect than Germans or members of other national groups. The 1944 report to Beria recorded what the police called the “political preparedness” of the republic for the people from the Caucasus. Typical comments, mostly from *other* deported people like Germans and Russian *kulaks*, included “we can stop working now, they’re going to send us to the Caucasus soon” - “if they really helped the Germans we won’t accept them” - “not a good nation, they’re going to beat you and cut you .”<sup>8</sup> Many bosses refused to release food products, to hire them as workers, or even (initially) to sign them up as collective farm members. Bosses publicly shamed the Caucasians, using the slurs “thieves” and “bandits,” sent them to the worst work assignments, and some routinely resorted to physical violence and beatings.<sup>9</sup> A Chechen farm worker in Kazakhstan stated:

*I worked as a cattle herder for twenty-five years. In all this time I never once humiliated my animals like they humiliated us. The komendanty and collective farm chairmen told us straight out that we were to be the lowest of the low, without rights. You didn’t have the right to complain about anything to the chairman, they told you to sit, shut up, do what we tell you. Brigade leaders and chairmen would hit us, and there was nowhere to complain about it.*<sup>10</sup>



Cover page of statistical report on exile populations, Akmolinsk, Kazakh SSR, 1949

The election campaign to the Supreme Soviet in January 1946 gave the Chechens somewhere to complain, since they could choose to disrupt it by not participating *en masse*. They seized onto that opportunity immediately. The hostility of the Chechens to the regime and their bitterness in exile is widely documented in testimonies that were collected by the secret police just before the 1946

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous interview, Atbasar region, July 21, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 176, l. 199.

<sup>9</sup> GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 532, l. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Anonymous interview, Kazakhstan, Summer 2000.

elections, even if it is unclear how many of them actually ended up voting. The commissar of the Interior, Kruglov, reported to Stalin that the most “reactionary among the Muslim spiritual leaders” were openly hostile to the elections, and that they were calling on believers to boycott the elections all over Kazakhstan, primarily for the overt reason that no Chechen or Ingush representatives were among the candidates. The police increased its “operative work” among the deportees to prevent “banditry, various excesses and provocations, and the spread of anti-Soviet leaflets and slogans,” and arrested at least forty individuals in Kazakhstan for actively engaging in such anti-election activities.<sup>11</sup>

As the following statements show, the Chechens not only decided not to participate in any elections until they were allowed to return home, they deliberately sought to disrupt these elections to show the outside world that Soviet democracy was a sham, and finally, many expressed the expectation that the restoration of their autonomy would be aided by the Western powers. This last was the most alarming aspect of their resistance to the elections to the party leadership.

*We're all undoubtedly going to leave for the Caucasus and on election day to the Supreme Soviet I won't vote and I ask you all to follow my example (Chechen special settler Zakriev Bibulat, Alma-Atinskii raion)*

*I won't participate in the polling, because the Soviet government did not send us to Kazakhstan to live, but to die. I would vote for an Anglo-American government with pleasure, because it would be better than the Soviet (Chechen special settler Khaidiev Muskhadzhi, Alma-Ata).*

*After the elections we will return to the Caucasus, because England and America will help us restore our state. That is why we will not vote for Soviet candidates, we are going to vote in the Caucasus, for our candidates. (Chechen special settler Dadaev Akhmet, Alma-Ata).*

*There was a meeting in London of three ministers, where the ministers of England and America warned the Soviet representatives that they will look after if the Soviet people vote in the elections and then they'll decide, will the Soviet order be preserved or not. Undoubtedly the communists will agitate and try to fool us to take part in the election but we need to understand that and keep separate from the voting (Chechen special settler Makaev Alaudin, Alma-Atinskii raion).<sup>12</sup>*

One could cite many more examples. The Chechens were not alone in exile and they were not the only deportees who decided to refuse to vote – a German woman said “I refuse to vote for this power because it is against God-”<sup>13</sup> but they fought against the elections with the greatest determination and coordination. They were also not the only deportees to harbor hopes for foreign intervention. One can find examples of similar statements from among former kulaks and Germans and many other Caucasians. However, among the Chechens this belief clearly played a special role. Another example of this is in an August 1946 report from Kruglov to Stalin, Molotov, Beria, and Zhdanov, which reports the following reaction to news of the dissolution of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR by Akhmet Abadiev, in Kustanai, “in the presence of a group of special settlers.”

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<sup>11</sup> GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 248, l. 151.

<sup>12</sup> GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 248, ll. 265-266, January 9, 1946, “O nastroeniiakh spetspereselentsev, rasselennykh v Kazakhskoi SSR v sviazi s vyborami v Verkhovnyi Soviet SSSR.”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, l. 266.

*Even if they decided to dissolve the Chechen-Ingush and Crimean ASSR at the Supreme Soviet session, England, America, and France got involved in this question, and demanded from the USSR lists of all these nationalities and at the session of the international conference they will propose the return of the special settlers to their previous residence.*<sup>14</sup>

These testimonies raise many questions. Did anyone in ‘England and America’ know that the Chechens held these beliefs, and who? Why did no one respond? It turns out that our silence and complicity go back much further than the last ten years.

It is sobering to consider that foreign intervention *did*, some years later, lead to significant reforms for the Germans in exile, in connection with the visit of Konrad Adenauer to the USSR in 1955. When the Germans were taken off the ‘special settler status’ (although they had to remain in the places of exile) the Caucasians were deeply offended, unable to understand how they were ‘any worse’ than the Germans.<sup>15</sup>

A number of people have told me that a certain myth of English or interchangeably American sponsorship of a Chechen republic goes back to the nineteenth century – does it and does it even still exist? What is the origin, and how aware are people of the fact that these beliefs were so widely spread in the 1940s? Did the people who made these statements really believe that foreign intervention was imminent? How much of a role did this belief in ‘England and America’ actually play in the unwavering faith of the Chechens that they would go home? Clearly Chechen traditions and religious faith played the key role here, and these provocative statements played only a very specific role. These statements were just what the NKVD *recorded* as the most threatening denial of Soviet power in exile. It is likely some people deployed them consciously as the most effective ‘anti -Soviet’ slogan they could possibly produce.

After the first few years of exile, the Chechens continued to refuse integration into a Soviet society that defined and treated them as second-class citizens and as a ‘special contingent.’ Nearly every document on the Chechens in archives in Russia and Kazakhstan reveals ways in which individuals and communities fought the Soviet state that had sent them away from their home to die. They refused to be humiliated, they refused to be slaves, they refused to let their children be indoctrinated, they refused to lose their faith and their traditions. On the contrary, they became stronger as a nation, and the spirit of resistance that is evident in the 1940s only grew stronger after Stalin’s death. In the 1950s, during the period of Khrushchev’s reforms, the Chechens engaged in intensive mass resistance and grass roots political activity, and eventually they forced the Soviet state to let them return home.

On the anniversary of the deportation we remember and honor the suffering and the ultimate survival of the Chechen people. In their darkest hour, many of the deportees held fast to the belief that they would be saved by the Western powers. It appears that knowledge of this belief did not go beyond the Soviet NKVD officers who recorded the statements and their bosses, and in the West, the plea has remained completely unknown. There has been a wall of silence around the Chechens not just for the last ten years of genocidal war, but for *sixty* years. This is deeply disturbing and humbling.

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<sup>14</sup> GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 265, l. 83.

<sup>15</sup> See "Neuzheli eti zemli nashei mogiloi stanut? Chechentsy i ingushi v Kazakhstane (1944-1957 gg.)", *Diaspory* (Moscow), Vol. 4, No. 2 (2002), p. 201.

On this anniversary, ten of thousands of people around the globe commemorate this tragedy with fasting and demonstrations and other events. There is to be no commemoration on February 23 in Moscow and almost no debate of the anniversary in Russia. It is thus even more important to have the world wide attention to the deportation, to the current situation in the republic, and to the backlash against the Chechens living in Russia – and to sustain it *beyond* February 23. Many individuals outside and in Russia want to break the seemingly endless silence, even if our governments do not. We must end the “absolute solitude” of the Chechens. The reflections, fasting, and demonstrations are actions offered with humility, without any afterthought but the hope to help find ways out of the bloodshed and indeed the desire to be close to the Chechen people on February 23.