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Rethinking the “postcolonial” in the postcolonial interview

Mikhal Dekel

Department of English and the Comparative Literature Program, City University of New York (CUNY)
Graduate Center, New York, USA

ABSTRACT

Beginning in 2007, the author spent a decade researching the flight of European Holocaust refugees into the Soviet interior, Central Asia, and the Middle East. She traveled to Russia, Uzbekistan, Poland, and Israel, and – via an intermediary – Iran. She conducted interviews in Syktyvkar, Samarqand and other places where descendants of former refugees and locals who were in contact with them now live. She also unearthed testimonies and interviews that were conducted with refugees and locals in the 1940s. The result was a multi-faceted mosaic that complicates commonly held views about the relationship between east and west, empire and native, migrant and the nation-state. The article discusses the challenge this research poses for some of the basic assumptions of canonical postcolonial theory and argues for fine-tuning the latter’s often binary perspective between the west and the Other by combining it with the sociological insights of the field of memory studies.

KEYWORDS

Russia; Central Asia;
refugees; memory studies;
postcolonial; stereotype

For a decade between 2007 and 2017 I travelled to Poland, Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Israel, and deployed a research associate in Iran, where I could not travel, to piece together the story of roughly a quarter of a million Polish-born Holocaust survivors who had escaped the Nazi genocide by fleeing to the Soviet Union, getting deported to gulags in the Soviet interior, and then continuing on – through deportations and evacuations – to Central Asia and the Middle East. Theirs was a different survival story to the one that is usually associated with survival in death camps and hiding. They survived Stalin, not Hitler; they survived (or died in) the gulag, not the extermination camp; they survived mostly in the Muslim world, not the Christian world. By an accident of history, they traded a death sentence from the Nazis with an extremely harsh, yet more survivable fate as Soviet slave laborers, deportees, and war refugees. This accidental fate also thrust them, in most cases forever, out of Europe and into colonized/quasi-colonized or postcolonial lands – Siberia, Komi, Arkhangelsk, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, India, Yemen, Lebanon, Kenya, and Palestine – where they passed through and in which they sometimes settled for good. Astonishingly, this is the experience of most Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust. Roughly three and a half million Jews lived in Poland before the war; about 350,000, or 10 percent, remained

alive after the war. Of these, approximately 230,000 to 250,000 survived in the manner described in the regions I travelled to. Among them was my father.

The story of the Holocaust refugees who survived (or died) in the east has remained largely unknown, for a variety of political and practical reasons. Soviet gulags were not “liberated” in 1945; crimes committed on the “victorious” Soviet side during World War II were not interrogated; until Perestroika, archives in Soviet Russia and Central Asia were inaccessible, and even today research remains very limited. Many archives have not been made fully available – or had been opened and then closed – and conducting research in these regions, as well as in Iran, remains difficult and risky. Because of this lack of previous research, I had not only to search for answers, but also to formulate the questions that needed to be asked. This presented a challenge, but also a *carte blanche* to engage with materials, regions, and people through utterly fresh eyes.

In many, perhaps most cases, I was the first to interview people about this subject in the Russian interior, Uzbekistan, and (via proxy) Iran. Because I was the first, there was a spontaneity to these encounters, during which neither I nor my interviewees possessed well-rehearsed questions and answers. This was also true for the initial encounters between the European exiles (who were enslaved and later released) and the natives of the Komi Republic, Uzbekistan, or Iran, which took place in the years 1940–43. This meeting point of European exiles and Finno Ugric natives of Komi and Arkhangelsk, as well as Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Persians, and Indians can be understood through the lens of postcolonial theory. My own travels as a western scholar in these nominally postcolonial lands and my interviews were also shaped by the sensibility of one trained in postcolonial theory.

Yet having travelled and conducted these interviews, I would argue that postcolonial theory, from Fanon through Said, Spivak, and Bhabha, does not adequately describe the reality I met in 2014, nor that of the 1940s, which I researched. Postcolonial theory – in which I was trained at Columbia University in the 1990s – assumes the existence of a colonizer and a colonized subject who operate in a world of set hierarchies, fantasies, power relations, and exploitation. But the experiences I had, as well as those I uncovered, complicate these assumptions. As I will show below, the agents of colonization (the exiles) were themselves cruelly oppressed, sometimes at the hands of indigenous people. Indigenous people whose cultures were suppressed and sometimes erased did not view themselves as having been colonized; formerly exiled and indigenous people alike defined themselves not in ethnic terms, but in national terms (as Russian, Uzbek, and so on), and more. To accommodate the social and political reality of these regions and of other parts of the world, postcolonial theory, much of which was formed on the basis of the anglophone experiences, needs to be expanded. To do so, I will make a case for postcolonial theory to engage more deeply with the newly formed discipline of memory studies.

Memory studies focuses on how traumatic pasts are remembered on multiple levels: by states and other official organizations; by memory activists and groups who oppose state-generated narratives of the past; and by individuals (victims, perpetrators, bystanders, witnesses, and so on). Unlike some strands of postcolonial theory, which rely on theoretical frameworks from above, proponents of memory studies – Jeffrey Olick, Astrid Erll, Jenny Wüstenberg, and others studying different regions of the world – tend to work from the bottom up, analysing realities on the

ground and focusing on possibilities of change derived from within this framework rather than imposing a utopian vision on it.¹ Thus, putting postcolonial theory in conversation with memory studies may help it transcend top-down, binary models of subject and object and models that involve rigid hierarchical power relations, and offer a more precise model for describing the way information, empathy, suspicion, and care circulate in different parts of the world (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map of movement of Holocaust refugees in the years 1939–43 (Cartographer: Greg Pawelski. Copyright Mikhal Dekel). https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Lb4PDEmJve-Po_xaaJArOkErNfZsqeR-/view?usp=drive_web.

Gulag slave labourers and indigenous peoples in the Soviet Empire

The long voyage of Holocaust refugees to Central Asia, India, and the Middle East began with the flight of hundreds of thousands from Nazi-occupied Poland into the USSR, where Soviet authorities arrested up to 400,000 Polish Jews (alongside some Christian Poles) and exiled them to gulags in Siberia, Arkhangelsk, Komi, and elsewhere in the

Soviet interior. Entire families, including small children, were arrested by the Soviet secret police, NKVD (Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del [People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs]), who herded them into boarded-up cargo trains, and shipped them off without food or water for up to a fortnight. If they survived, they were typically dumped in a log station in the middle of seemingly nowhere, unfenced but guarded and surrounded by tundra.

Unlike the death camp, the gulag was not designed to kill, but it killed. It killed because of its inhumanity. Prisoners aged 13 years or older became slaves, were fed almost nothing, and worked to death or near death in subpar conditions. As Anne Appelbaum (2012) explains, they were expendable and portable: large swathes of humans that could be moved to the sparsely populated far reaches of the Soviet Empire, where no Russian would go voluntarily. As such, in addition to providing free slave labour, gulags also served as a tool of colonization.

We know today, Appelbaum notes, that there were at least 467 different camp systems in the former Soviet Union, each one made of hundreds of individual camps: a central log post with dozens of forestry stations around it, sometimes spread over thousands of miles of open tundra. A forestry station contained anywhere from dozens to thousands of prisoners who lived in a location and under living conditions that were generally considered by the central administration to be uninhabitable (Appelbaum 2012). And yet people *had* inhabited these lands for hundreds of years: indigenous Komi people in Komi; Lapps and Samoyeds in Arkhangelsk; and other subgroups of the larger Finno Ugric population that inhabited Russia's northeast.

Until the 18th century, with the exception of Russian hunters and fur traders, Russians did not settle in Komi, and indigenous Komi were the largest population group in the Republic of Komi, a central northern plateau at the foot of Russia's Ural Mountains, west of the Siberian Plain, to where Polish Jews were exiled in great numbers. In 1780, Catherine the Great built the first penal colony and began exiling there. Since then, most of Komi's "settlers" were prisoners of gulags, who by the time Polish Jews arrived already numbered hundreds of thousands. Slaves like my father cut down miles of Komi's tundra, which covered three-quarters of its land. They built railroads, factories, and infrastructure. They built towns that developed around slave-labour camps and, after they were released, they continued to live there. From roughly 6000 Komi farmers, cattle breeders, fishermen, and hunters at the beginning of the 20th century, the population of Komi's capital, Syktyvkar, increased by slave deportation to 235,000.

In 2014, I made a research trip to Syktyvkar. With me was an informal guide and translator, Nikolai Alexeev, who was born in Syktyvkar to an indigenous Komi father and an exiled slave-labourer mother. Nikolai and I took a 29-hour train ride together from Moscow, where he now lives, to his birthplace. Syktyvkar, which was built by slaves, is inhabited today mostly by their descendants and the descendants of former gulag guards and camp commanders. Former slaves and their descendants account for 90 percent of the Komi Republic's population, including its president. Indigenous Komi are now a minority and most, like Nikolai's parents, have intermarried with Russians. They do not identify as Komi – not publicly anyway – but as Russians. The only trace to an indigenous past in this city of blight, drunkenness, gloomy Soviet architecture, and pockets of gentrification is the Natsionalnyy Muzey Respubliki Komi, the Museum of Indigenous Komi, a neat, four-storey building that boasts

a taxidermy of bears, reindeers, pike, and ducks (holy animals to the ancient Komi), as well as displays of spears, sleds, and fur coats, and photos of hunters and gatherers. The museum was created by Dmitri Nesarelis, the son of formerly enslaved, Warsaw-born Polish Jews. Born in the gulag, Nesaralis has become the leading anthropologist of the Finno Ugric peoples of the region.

We have, then, in this case of Komi, a metonymic chain of empire, exile-slave, and native. The Soviet Empire mobilizes exile-slaves in order to erase indigenous difference and incorporate native people into its midst. Exile-slaves, by sheer numbers, erase the native, but also, whether consciously or not, end up preserving traces of Komi difference in the region. Meanwhile, the exile-slave's identity of origin is erased completely. Nesaralis became Russian; his parents were forced to surrender their Polish citizenship; and were not allowed to practise their Jewish religion and culture, particularly in the post-war decades, was repressed or outlawed. (Beginning in the late 1940s, Stalin conducted purges of Jewish cultural institutions, writers, and artists.) Both indigenous peoples and exile-slaves, then, became subsumed under the umbrella of a pan-Soviet and then Russian identity.

The very fact of exile and slavery has been erased as well. There is no exile museum in Komi – a “Gulag Museum”, featuring undated, decontextualized photographs of a few gulags and several photos of the life of Leon Trotsky, exists in Moscow – and no official memorial or monument of exiles. Yet unlike the disappeared traces of indigenous life in the public sphere, there are nonetheless unmarked traces of gulags and their attendant violence strewn around Komi; for example, Plesmek, a mere 20 miles from Syktyvkar: a former gulag that confined 20,000 people, including many Polish POWs (prisoners of war) who had been captured after the 1939 Soviet invasion of Poland. The gulag continued to operate until 1956. Its commanders, administrators, and guards continued to live in their gulag residences long after 1956, later selling them as dachas, summer homes for city people. The commandant's barrack, which was built of stone, is still intact. A farm of livestock, patches of a wooden fence, and remnants of structures that had been a prison and a court also remain. Nearby, in Posiołek Jerome, newly built, spacious dachas are nestled between deserted old slave-labourer barracks and miscellaneous agricultural machines in a kind of grassy, lazy, half-deserted, totally unmenacing rural scene. “Lower your voice”, someone said to me when we passed a large, quaint redbrick house. The sons of the head administrators of the camp still lived there.

The mother of my Russian host Nikolai Alexeev was born in Jerome, where his grandparents were enslaved. The blue brick building that had been the orphanage where she was placed while her mother was enslaved was now a neat-looking boarding school, its handsome wood interior undergoing renovations while the children were on their summer break. The Russian construction workers, friendly and polite, gladly showed us the original walls and ceilings of the building they were renovating. They had no idea about its former function. Many former inmates of Jerome, including Nikolai's grandparents, built a neighbourhood of decent-size brick houses a few kilometres away once they were released from slave labour. An elderly lady in a wool hat and black sunglasses, a neighbour of Nikolai's mother's, recognized him and stopped us. I asked to interview her. Her parents had been professors in Tver, a pretty provincial city 180 kilometres northwest of Moscow, when they were deported to Jerome in 1941, she said. I asked her if she was angry about their deportation. Instead of replying, she turned

around and disappeared in the direction of the nearby Sysola River, where for seven years her parents had loaded timber onto barges that carried it off to the western Soviet Union.

She was not alone to dodge my questions. Until the late 1980s, merely talking to a foreigner could land a Russian in jail and, even now, authorities were watching, particularly in remote areas like Komi. Nikolai too shrugged when I tried to interview him about his Moscow-born deportee mother (“Was she angry? Was she resentful?” “No, why?”), or about his indigenous Komi father, who became, he told me, a Soviet State apparatchik. One son of former deportee-slaves, Anton Beck, a moustached and heavyset Russian of German ethnicity, agreed to an interview. His parents had been deported to Komi from Saratov in the Volga Republic, where nearly 800,000 Germans had been living since the mid-18th century (Catherine the Great had offered them land and other privileges in exchange for developing the region). He was born in 1941 in a gulag nearby where his parents would be conscripted for 17 years. In 1955 they were rehabilitated and became teachers in Syktyvkar, and Beck, now retired, became a news reporter. He was one of the few Komi residents who were willing to be filmed and recorded:²

Me: Why did you choose to stay in Syktyvkar? Aren’t you angry at what was done to your family?

Beck (reading from a double-spaced, long document he had prepared for our interview, a long, very general description of life in the gulag, ending with these words): I am a Russian. Why should I leave? I do not speak German. I feel myself a Russian.

(Anton Beck, pers. comm. with author, June 15, 2014)

The main difficulty of imposing a postcolonial lens on the indigenous and exilic past of this region is, therefore, that Komi’s colonization is not recognized as such by its residents. The story of the deportations, slave labour, and cultural and economic annihilation of the Komi people is treated by Komi residents as “natural” and subsumed under a narrative of “Russian greatness”, a narrative actively propagated by the Russian state and on the surface shared by all. A notable exception to this was the human rights activist Michel Rogachov, member of the Nobel Prize-winning organization Memorial, whose office collects lists of names of gulag prisoners, and works to uncover sites of former gulags and burial sites of gulag prisoners.

On a sunny June day, Rogachov took me and an entourage of locals to one such burial ground: miles of unmarked mounds of earth, in a forest right outside Syktyvkar. He said: “Every day they would cart the day’s dead and bury them together in a single hole. Those who died of hunger would be shot in the heart before they were buried, to make sure they were dead” (Michel Rogachov, pers. comm. with author, June 10, 2014). We walked for half an hour atop masses of corpses. No names, no gravestones, just the raw earth and a handful of strewn crosses, prisoner numbers that were carved on trees, or “wooden pyramids”, the half of a Star of David that was the secret sign that Jewish slaves sometimes made for their dead. Of my entourage, which included Nikolai, a friend who was our driver, and a local teenage translator, no one had previously been there or known about it. The teenager was particularly devastated. Nothing of Komi’s past is studied in school, and she had no idea how her parents or grandparents got to Komi. Komi’s elderly people knew from first-hand experience, of course, but they were often genuine patriots and refrained from any

critique. Syktyvkar was littered with memorials to the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, which at least on the surface seemed to occupy a larger space in people's minds than their own family's exilic and slave-labour past.

Thus, to the extent that the interviews I conducted in Komi can be called "postcolonial interviews", a shocking gap lay between such brutally raw evidence of the past and the words of locals I interviewed. As for Komi's indigenous people, theirs was an even more elusive story. They have been erased, in the sense that there are no longer people who identify as indigenous in the region, and yet their name is the republic's name, and their past has been curated as the region's myth of origin. Ironically, much of this curation was done by a descendant of those whose deportation demolished indigenous lives. This seems ironic, but only to a person looking at the situation from the outside. For locals, both the story of the exiled slaves and that of the indigenous peoples of Komi have been subsumed by the much larger and all-encompassing umbrella of Soviet (and then Russian) nationalism, as exemplified by the Monument of Eternal Glory, the three 20-foot-high bronze women – the mother, wife, and daughter – and of a fallen soldier, that looms high in Syktyvkar's town centre. This seems natural to them.

It is easy for an interviewer trained in postcolonial theory, familiar with terms such as the "other" or "settler colonialism", to regard these feelings, beliefs, and self-perception of formerly oppressed peoples as "false consciousness", naivety, or ignorance. But then one falls into the trap of condescension, and worse: one does what postcolonial theory seeks to undo. Resisting that, interviewing in the far reaches of Russia thrusts the interviewer against the limits of her epistemological frameworks. She notes, for example, that with very few exceptions, western scholars, western theorists of empire and the colonial world have rarely tackled the Soviet/Russian Empire as an object of study.³ Had they done so, they would need to theorize the form of imperialism that did not develop alongside the rise of capital; find an adequate label for the exile-slave (as a colonized subject, or a settler-colonist, or both); account for the particular mechanism of the gulag; and seriously confront Soviet/Russian patriotism.

More specifically, the epistemological framework of central postcolonial thinkers, from Fanon to Bhabha to Said, is rooted to a large extent in the psychology of the individual ("the fetish", "the other"); focuses on the outright denigration of the colonial subject ("abjection", "subaltern", "fear"); and articulates a critique of European empires and nations that legally and philosophically, if not practically, adopted the values of emancipation and enlightenment. None of these are particularly helpful when applied to analysing the colonial/postcolonial world of the Soviet/Russian Empire, whose subjugation of indigenous and enslaved peoples is rooted in ideology, coercion, and "positive" narratives of strength, sacrifice, and national belonging. The individuals I met and interviewed in Komi were shaped by these narratives, and it was impossible as well as futile to try to pin down an "interiority" that existed independently of them. To understand these narratives, I turned from the realm of individual psychology that dominates some strands of postcolonial theory to collectivist memory studies. How and by whom were the narratives that shaped people's self-perception created? When and by whom was the Soviet/Russian public sphere designed? What are not only the covert, but the overt methods of coercion that shaped the responses I received in my interviews? Finding the answers to these questions in a world where information about past and present violations is intentionally obscured took a long, concerted, and collaborative effort.

A “friendship of peoples”

The second destination of my travels was Uzbekistan, where, after they were amnestied, most surviving Polish citizens, including Polish Jews, were re-exiled following their release from gulags in Komi and elsewhere. Although each gulag survivor was assigned to a Central Asian kolkhoz (collectivist village), they were not deported in an organized fashion, but proceeded individually by train, cart, or on foot, in part with the desire to escape the gulag and its brutal temperatures, but also to flee approaching Nazi forces. Most would remain in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan for the duration of the war; some, for their entire lives.

In addition to sending released slave labourers south, between June 1941 and autumn of 1942, Soviet authorities, fearing the fall of Moscow and Leningrad to Nazi forces, also evacuated approximately 16.5 million of their own citizens to the same regions. Thus, joining the “amnestied” Polish refugees in Central Asia and greatly outnumbering them were the Soviet *evakuirovannyy*: intellectuals, artists, and scientists; members of the Soviet Academy of Arts and Sciences; screen actors, actresses, and directors; government officials; top industrialists; members of the cultural and political elite of Moscow and Leningrad; factory workers from the western USSR who were evacuated along with their factories; and entire government offices, prisons, and cultural institutions like ballets and theatres.

Among the evacuees were the biggest names in interwar culture: the poets Anna Akhmatova, Nadezhda Mandelstam, and Korney Chukovsky; the novelists Aleksey Tolstoy and Boris Pasternak; the film director Vladimir Aslanov; the Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky; and several others. The stated purpose of the evacuation was to avoid an uncontrolled exodus of people, but its unstated purpose, as the historian Rebecca Manley (2009) put it, was to shape the modern Soviet Union by “generating, organizing, and categorizing migration” (4). “At its core”, Manley writes, “the operation aimed to retain control over Soviet space, threatened, in the eyes of the state, not only by German forces, but by ‘enemy elements’ and internal dissolution” (2009, 26). Enemy elements included Jews and Muslims, the largest population groups in the Central Asian Republics.

By the time of the refugees’ and evacuees’ arrival in Muslim Central Asia, it was already famished. Even before the war, Stalinist policy mandated that Uzbek farmers replace nearly all food cultivation with growing cotton; they were not allowed to grow rice or wheat and were prohibited from leaving their regions in search of food. After the German invasion of the USSR, farmers were required to surrender to the Red Army even the little they had, confiscation enforced by routine searches, raids, and arrests. In this way, both refugees and evacuees were thrown into immediate and intimate contact with locals under the harshest conditions of competition for resources.

Here is how my father Hannania Teitel described Kolkhoz Octoyber in Kazakhstan, where his family was sent to live and work:

The kolkhoz was a very poor one. It was already wintertime, so there was no work in the field. The Uzbeks asked us why we had come there. They didn’t know what to do with the fresh crop of 200 people and where they were going to get food for such a crowd [. . .]. [There] was no place where you could purchase something and even worse: there was no one who wished to buy something from you in exchange for a piece of bread. The Uzbeks go

about wrapped in bed sheets [. . .]. They need nothing, so we literally starved there and many people died of hunger [. . .]. We were not allowed to leave the kolkhoz. We were sentenced to sitting there and dying of hunger. (quoted in Dekel 2021, 136)⁴

Whereas these living conditions of extreme scarcity coupled with the arrival of millions of newcomers could potentially have led to bloodshed, it rarely did. One of the ways in which relationships between newcomers and natives were mitigated was through the concept of “friendship of peoples”, a term popularized by the Soviet government in the 1930s that was repeatedly used at the outset of World War II to describe relations between Uzbek and Kazakh Soviets and other Soviet evacuees. Throughout 1940 and 1941, *Pravda Vostoka* ran articles with headlines like “The Uzbek People Have Forcefully Demonstrated Just How Strong the Friendship of Peoples Is in Our Soviet Socialist State” (*Pravda Vostoka* 1942). Friendship or brotherhood of peoples was, as historian Terry Martin (2001) puts it, the “officially sanctioned metaphor of an imagined multinational Soviet community” (330): a lens that substituted the distinction between locals and foreigners, and native and settler, with a picture of distinct but equal parts of a single Soviet system. Martin calls this type of imperialism “the affirmative action empire”, one that rules through affirmation rather than denigration and coercion (5).

Under the umbrella of the “friendship of peoples”, the Moscow State Jewish Theatre, whose actors and director, Solomon Mikhoels, were evacuated to Tashkent, performed a Yiddish translation of the drama *Khamza*, named after the Uzbek revolutionary author and playwright, Hamza Hakimzade Niyazi (1942). *Khamza*, about the Uzbek director Khamid Almidzhan, who co-directed with Mikhoels, praised the Yiddish director for his “tremendous help to Uzbek dramatic arts”, and Mikhoels, when asked by a British journalist about this “meeting of East and West”, rejected the Brit’s colonial premise, stating that the influences had been reciprocal, and the work was a collaboration between distinct but equal “Soviet theatres” (quoted in Manley 2009, 221).

Also under the umbrella of the “friendship of peoples”, the evacuated Russian formalist theorist Viktor Zhirmunsky, a specialist in German Romanticism at the University of Leningrad, taught himself the Kazakh and Uzbek languages and began to research the epics of the Asian peoples of the Soviet Union, in particular the Akyn, improvisational poets and singers of Kazakh and Krygyz culture. Dmitri Ushanov, the philologist, lexicographer, and creator of the definitive four-volume *Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language* (1935–1940), began work on a Russian–Uzbek dictionary. A group of evacuated historians from the Academy of Sciences Institute of History began collaborating with Uzbek colleagues on a collective history of Uzbekistan.

Rather than resisting the newcomers, the Uzbek poet G’afur G’ulom (1943) published the poem “Siz Yetim Emmasiz” (1943; You Are Not An Orphan), arguably the most famous Uzbek wartime poem, an epic about an Uzbek father who, having adopted an evacuee child, reassures the young boy who has been separated from his parents: “Are you really an orphan? [. . .] Relax my dear [. . .]. If your father is alive, let the shadow of worry not disturb him amid the horror and the fire, let him know: his son is with me!” (1943; quoted in Manley 2009, 241). The poem was inspired by the case of an Uzbek blacksmith, Shaakhmed Shamakhmudov, whose family was said to have adopted 15 children of all evacuated and deported nationalities. A “Monument of the Friendship of Peoples”, an enormous bronze statue of Shamakhmudov, surrounded by his 15 adoptees, was erected in a Tashkent square that bore the same name (Dekel 2021, 156).

Deportees' interactions with locals were framed not only by the Soviet state, but also by other religious or ideological affiliations. Socialists like Mula Ben Hayyim, a member of the Socialist Zionist movement Ha'shomer Ha'tsair, for example, described these interactions in positive terms. In his testimony he calls the negative incidents between locals and refugees "exceptional" and reiterates the "deep brotherhood" between the local Uzbek farmers and himself and his friends. After the reduction of the refugees' daily rations to 400 grammes of unprocessed barley, he writes,

the more established local families invited us for meals, which helped a lot [. . .]. I would even say they appreciated us. They definitely learned things from us that they did not know [. . .]. The Uzbek members of the kolkhoz were very nice and welcoming. They cared for our needs; they really made an effort for us. (quoted in Dekel 2021, 142)

Encounters were also governed by location, a subtle yet significant factor that determined wartime interactions between the deportees, evacuees, and indigenous populations. In general, deportees fared better in Kazakhstan than in Uzbekistan: the Kazakhs, unlike the Uzbeks, were nomadic people, less loyal to the Soviets, and more open to the new refugee nomads in their midst. There were also differences among groups and year of arrival. Between 1935 and 1941, in addition to Polish Jews, Germans, Chechens, Baltic nationals, and also Kalmyks, Balkars, Karachays, Turks, Poles, and Far East Koreans were exiled to Central Asia. Among them was the family of an ethnic Korean Uzbek history student, Sergey Kim, whom I interviewed.⁵ One hundred and seventy four thousand ethnic Koreans were exiled to Uzbekistan from Khabarovsk, the region in the Russian far east where they migrated from Korea in the late 19th century. Of them, 40,000 are said to have died from starvation and exposure. Those who survived became a link in the "friendship of peoples" and for the most part remain citizens of Uzbekistan. Kim was the only one of my interviewees who was willing to say anything negative publicly. He recounted to me the ordeals Uzbek Koreans have suffered at the hands of the Soviet State but took care to distinguish the state from the good "Uzbek people". He also distinguished between his ancestors and the Jewish refugees, who were exiled in the midst of genocide: "Jewish deportees could not have survived anywhere other than Central Asia. They would have been killed by the locals", he insisted (pers. comm. with author, June 21, 2014).

In time, relations between Kazakhs, Uzbeks, evacuees, and particularly Polish deportees deteriorated somewhat. In 1942, Stanisław Kot (1963), the Polish government-in-exile ambassador to the USSR, complained to Soviet authorities that "the local Mongol population" in Kazakhstan "were behaving very ruthlessly towards [Polish] citizens" (206). The Soviet government eventually discarded the "friendship of peoples" metaphor, pitting the ethnic groups in Central Asia against each other, particularly against the Jews. After the collapse of the USSR and the declaration of Uzbek state sovereignty, even the statue of the "Friendship of Peoples" was removed from the city centre. And yet the horizontal metaphor of the "friendship of peoples" continues to colour the ways both Uzbeks and former deportees I interviewed both within and outside Central Asia talked about the wartime past.

Eliosha Poznijac, who now lives in Israel, was a Polish-born Jewish boy like my father, who spent the war years with his mother and siblings in the Kazakh village of Dzhabul. In interviews and recollections he gave late in life he attributes his family's survival to Dzhabul's children, who taught him how to carry water from the river, pluck bird

feathers, ride camels, drink camel milk, and dry camel dung, from which *kibitkas* – huts – were made. He recalls how as a ten-year-old he learned to speak Kazakh, helped support his family by hunting and farming, and, by his second year in the village, he no longer remembered Poland. He describes relations between locals and newcomers in terms of mutual curiosity and aid.

In my interviews with Uzbeks, the concept of “hospitality” was often mentioned as well. Islamic studies professor Mona Siddiqui (2015) links hospitality to the Qur’anic commandment to “do good” to parents, relatives, orphans, the needy, “the near neighbor” (*jāridhī l-qurbā*), and “the neighbor farther away” (*l-jāri l-junūbi*), a category that at least according to some commentators includes non-Muslims (27). And although hospitality was at times very far from incidents of exploitation and violence that took place in Central Asia during the war, it was a theological concept through which relationships were understood and described in post-war testimonies as well as in the interviews I conducted.

Among these was an interview with descendants of an Uzbek family to whose village relatives of my father were assigned. Jamil Boboqulov, a man of about 50, had heard the story of the Polish deportees from his father:

“What did you hear?” I asked.

“The Poles were in terrible shape”, he said. “They were thrown off the carts, jumped on the ground, and started eating anything they found. They ate grass, they ate live frogs, they ran after wild dogs and killed and ate them. They were too weak to work or even to stand. Many of them just lay down and died. They would cart them to the cemetery and bury them.”

“The Muslim cemetery?”

“Of course”, Jamil said, closing his eyes. “They buried them with no name, and that is why since that time we pray for them. Because of their hunger, because their suffering had been the greatest our people have ever seen.” (pers. comm. with author, June 23, 2024)⁶

This was a trope I often heard in Uzbekistan: that the suffering of Polish Jews was the greatest, and thus helped others alleviate their own suffering. And so it was that in this village in Uzbekistan, the indigenous folk were those who kept alive the memory of the erased past of slave-deportees. During my visit, on June 23, 2014, after Jamil told me what he heard from his father, he recited a blessing for the dead. We stood quietly at the plot while his teenage sons, giggling and bemused, filmed us with their iPad. Then we proceeded to a covered porch where his wife plucked pitta bread out of a stone oven and served it with bowls of salt water. Jamil kissed the bread and said a prayer for my family.

It is easy to dismiss this and other encounters I had and interviews I conducted in Uzbekistan as simply a product of residents’ reluctance to say anything negative – about anyone and anything. In the year I visited Uzbekistan, it ranked among the world’s ten worst dictatorships. No one spoke freely to me, and everyone painted a rosy picture of the past and the present. Sergey Kim, who spoke critically about the Soviet past and present-day repressive pro-Russian government, did so in whispers and off camera. Thus, I cannot vouch for what people “genuinely” thought or what they refrained from saying. I am not even sure that my interviewees could themselves answer that question. The Uzbeks I met and interviewed had little access to world news and no Internet. Certainly,

a world in which access to the Internet is blocked for most citizens (greater connectivity has become available after the death of dictator Islam Karimov) gives rise to individuals who are different from those living in open democracies. People could simply have said what they said to please me. And yet, I remain steadfast in feeling that there were moments, like the one at Jamil's home, in which physical and spiritual communication transcended any narrow self-interests, sterile conventions, or state oppression.

While my encounter with Jamil took place in a postcolonial country that had been part of an empire and gained independence, and while the economic gap between Jamil and me was undeniable, I do not think that these facts explain the full range of the dynamics that occurred between us. I was the daughter of a former exile-slave; he was the son of a former minority subject of the Soviet Empire. Our encounter, at that moment, was one of equals. While the general lens of postcolonial theory, say Gayatri Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern, can focus our attention on how the Soviet Empire suppressed the indigenous culture and customs of Jamil's forefathers, I am not sure it has the bandwidth to describe more nuanced encounters between players beyond the colonizer and the colonized. It also does not, to the best of my knowledge, give adequate expression to a voice such as Jamil's, whose identity did not at all appear to be shaped by the knowledge the colonizer had generated about it. And to the degree that the colonizer's knowledge, say the Soviet doctrine of the "friendship of peoples", had been used to subjugate Jamil's forefathers (into sharing their village with the exiles without resistance, for example), it also appears to have empowered him, strengthening aspects of their Muslim identity ("hospitality"), and serving to create cross-cultural bonds.

With its focus on the objectification of the "other" through the stereotype as fetish, postcolonial theory would have trouble capturing, dare I say, the *humanity* of the moment Jamil and I met. There are good reasons for that: the dangers of sentimentality that mask political and economic hierarchies and power relations; the cringeworthy trope of the "good native". And yet there were moments during my "postcolonial interviews" that transcended power relations, and that touched something deeper in me and seemingly in my interviewees. I was a descendant of sufferers, and even if my suffering ancestors had brought a measure of suffering to my interviewees' ancestors, for a moment we connected through shared mourning.

Iran, circa 1942

A similar moment of shared mourning is recounted in an anecdote with which I want to draw this article to a close. It is taken from a personal essay by a Polish-born refugee, rabbi, and Middle East scholar Dr Zeev Hirschberg (1944). The essay recounts Hirschberg's stay in Iran, where he and roughly 6000 Polish Jews (and over 100,000 Christian Poles) were evacuated from Uzbekistan. Iran at the advent of the war was a neutral country with close ties to Germany. In mid-1942, fearing that Iranian oil fields would fall into German hands, the Allies invaded it, deposed its pro-German king, anointed his pro-western son, and moved many troops and civilians there, including the Polish army-in-exile and the Polish refugees. Thus, Iran fell under a British-Soviet occupation (each had its separate zone of influence), though it was never fully colonized. The world into which the former exile-slaves arrived had bread but was not safe. It was a schizophrenic mix of Nazis, Gestapo, pro-Nazi Shia clerics, and intellectuals, alongside

British, Soviet, and American soldiers and civilians (Iran became a hub for US military aid in the Middle East). It had German Jewish refugees of the professional class who migrated to Iran with the rise of Hitler; Iraqi Jews who escaped pogroms in Iraq; and one of the oldest indigenous Jewish communities in the world. It also became a meeting point of European and Middle Eastern Jewish groups who previously knew nothing about each other. In Tehran, Hirschberg set out to explore these worlds, and here is how he describes a visit to an Iraqi synagogue in Tehran during Yom Kippur, 1942. I quote his description in its entirety:

At the large courtyard of the Alliance school, by the pool, these wealthy “Arabs” arranged a spot for themselves to pray during the High Holidays: they spread carpets, brought in lounge and armchairs, a Torah Ark, a table for Torah reading, and tents for protection from the sun – and thus a temporary synagogue was erected. For the women they placed seats in the balconies surrounding the garden so that they too could hear the prayer. I admit that praying in this place left a unique impression on me. There was nothing about it of the atmosphere inside our synagogues during High Holidays. No trace of the seriousness, the high-mindedness, the dread, and the awe that characterized our prayers. The men, dressed in pressed white suits, sat in a half circle around the pool, as if they were at a ball at a country club. The cool air, the pools with the tiny goldfish, and the tent above only strengthened this impression. Many small children, some without a hat, ran around the yard but did not interrupt the prayer. I sat and thought about what I saw. Perhaps these Baghdadi Jews have preserved Yom Kippur prayer in its original form. *Lo hayu yamim tovim le’Yisrael ke’khamisha-asar be’av ve’yom Kippur* (there were no good days for Israel like the fifteenth of the month of Av and Yom Kippur), the Torah says. Perhaps it is appropriate to celebrate Yom Kippur with joy and happiness, to send flowers to each other, and to act not as slaves dreading their rabbi, but as children who have sinned before their father and know that all will be forgiven. (Hirschberg 1944, 53; my translation)

This passage is the earliest text I know in which Jews are named “Arab”, in essence a precursor of the term “Arab Jew” that postcolonial scholars of Zionism like Ella Shohat (2017) and others would introduce half a century later. It demonstrates how a European rabbi like Dr Hirschberg both links himself to his hosts (the shared Yom Kippur holiday) and also differentiates from them (“our synagogues”). Before spending a decade researching the fates of people like Hirschberg and my father, and their native host communities, I would have read the sentence about Yom Kippur and “children who have sinned before their father” more cynically, if not paranoiacally, through the postcolonial lens, as a condescending and orientalist observation (natives as “children” and so on). But there was also something else in the description, something subtler, gentler, and more fleeting than the self-assured sensibility of a European colonizer, something that upended categories, hierarchies, and asked for beauty, mercy, forgiveness. Because I knew Dr Hirschberg was a refugee, and what he had been through and what he and all other refugees in Tehran lacked – possessions, connections, family, home, ritual – because he had been robbed of everything, I read his words as longing, fascination, and as openness to the possibility of a lovely, tranquil presence that overtook the European Orthodox rabbi at that moment. It could have been a moment in an oriental novel or memoir, but because of Hirschberg’s identity, it wasn’t. Above the colonial paradigms that shaped the identities of newcomers and natives in occupied Iran hovered the figure of the refugee: a moving figure, homeless, poor, alone, and struggling to survive, and that figure did not neatly fall within binary categories. Thus, reading Dr Hirschberg’s words and knowing

his fate, I could almost smell what he smelt and see what he saw: the spacious, fragrant garden, the cool air, the pools with the tiny goldfish, the men in white suits, the wealth in funds and in family members that refugees like him and my father no longer had, and an atmosphere of tranquillity in which guilt and dread of the divine presence were suddenly put into question in the face of beauty and the vision of a more merciful God.

Conclusion: We need to slow down

I want to stress again the time and effort that I put not only into researching and interviewing, but making sense of and responsibly articulating what I unearthed and experienced during my years of research and travel. This length of time and degree of effort were needed for a responsible assessment. The memory studies scholar Jenny Wüstenberg (2023) speaks of “slow memory”, which like “slow food” demands a long cooking time in order to bring out a precise and nuanced understanding of the past and how it is remembered and understood by multiple players.⁷ I embrace this notion. I think we need to resist an automatic classification of oppressed and oppressor, and suspend it until the study of historical circumstances, ideologies, religious beliefs, ways in which societies craft particular realities for their members, and other factors that shape interviewees’ self-understanding is completed. I also think we need to look beyond the West, and especially at historical and political particularities within Eastern Europe. Working as academics and not as journalists, we have the time and the duty to that. At the very least, as others have stated before me, proponents of postcolonial theory have the duty to explore underreached regions and societies.⁸

We also should not refrain from critiquing our own existing paradigms. Take, for example, Homi Bhabha’s (1994) psychodynamic concept of the stereotype, as that which both epitomizes and reactivates the unstable nature of colonial relations and the colonizer’s early fantasies of difference/erasure of difference. As Bhabha famously writes,

an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of “fixity” in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always “in place”, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated. (1994, 94–95)

Superficially, as we have seen, this understanding of the stereotype serves well as a road map for reading Hirschberg’s testimony. Yet when we study the material conditions and historical circumstances under which the testimony was given, we learn that the theory of the stereotype does not fully capture the way Hirschberg experienced the world at that moment of time. In theorizing relations between groups in colonial/postcolonial lands, it also does not account for the complex intersections of identity, which affect the ways groups interpret each other. The farmer Jamil Boboqulov, for example, is an Uzbek who lives and works within the social habitat of a repressive Uzbek state. Yet he is also a pious Muslim and, ultimately, a majority subject. The ethnic Korean Sergey Kim, who is roughly the same age and grew up under the same regime as Jamil, belongs to a successful

ethnic minority, but also to a persecuted religious (Presbyterian Christian) minority. These multilayered identities yielded distinct responses to my questions, and to my interactions with them.

Bhabha's psychoanalytic model also does not take into account material conditions that may supersede racial stereotyping and categorization: namely the rudimentary and animalistic struggle against hunger. Thus, Slavic studies scholar Olga Medvedeva-Nathoo (2003), who has studied the letters and diaries of Polish refugees in Kazakhstan, claims that refugees struggling to survive in extreme conditions did not have time to stereotype:

There is no doubt that to some degree the newcomers were discovering Asia, filling up the vacuum of ignorance with scraps of incidental observations. The mutual lack of knowledge between the "Westerners" and "Asians" – and the resulting lack of mutual stereotypes – created an opportunity for both sides to get to know each other. But one can hardly say that they were realized, as all the newcomers' energies were spent on trying to survive. (2)

Finally, any interviewer in a postcolonial setting should pay close attention to the degree of freedom, or lack of freedom, under which an interview takes place. In every setting, an interviewee will have motivations, evasions, fears, hopes, and a story they want to get across to the interviewer; in every interview there will also be a degree of self-censorship and pressure from family or community, which will determine which utterances are permissible and which are not. The well-prepared interviewer will sometimes be able to push through this self-censorship. Yet repression and coercion from the state or another external group that has at its disposal significant punitive measures is another story, one that will determine the course of an interview with absolute certainty and sometimes even endanger the interviewee. This simple, pragmatic fact, not accounted for in theoretical paradigms and often forgotten by western interviewers, can nonetheless be a central feature of the postcolonial interview.

Notes

1. For a brief summary of memory studies, see Milevsky and Wetenkamp (2022).
2. Interviewed by the author in Syktyvkar, Russia.
3. Exceptions include Suny (1993) and Kassymbekova (2016).
4. The testimony was collected originally in an interview with the Polish Government in Exile's Information Center in Jerusalem.
5. Interviewed by the author in Bukhara, Uzbekistan.
6. Transcribed conversation, Samarquand, Uzbekistan.
7. For practices and current research on the emergent concept of slow memory, see "SlowMemory – CA20105 – Transformative Practices for Times of Uneven and Accelerating Change." <https://www.slowmemory.eu/> and <https://www.jennywustenberg.com/slow-memory/>
8. See, for example, January 15, 2021, the call for papers by the journal *Studia Territorialia* for papers for a special issue titled "Postcolonial Perspectives in Area Studies", in which the editors urge scholars to focus on the "various territorial contexts in which control, domination, and exclusion occur". <https://networks.h-net.org/node/73374/announcements/9184207/postcolonial-perspectives-area-studies-special-issue>

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Notes on contributor

Mikhal Dekel is a distinguished professor of English and comparative literature at the City College of New York (CCNY) and the CUNY Graduate Center and the author of *Tehran Children: A Holocaust Refugee Odyssey* (2019). She is currently working on a book on restitution, which focuses on aftermaths of mass trauma in Poland, Russia, Israel/Palestine, Germany, and Namibia.

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