Final Report Guidelines

TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM
TITLE VIII COMBINED RESEARCH AND LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM

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When Muhamed Became Misha: Central Asia in the Soviet Empire at War, 1941-1945

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Research Abstract: My project examines how the Soviet Central Asian war effort transformed the Soviet empire and brought lasting changes to the region's cultural and political identities. The eventual book will be a social and cultural history of Central Asian military service, labor mobilization, kolkhoz reorganization, and cultural production that emphasizes the assimilatory striving of Central Asian soldiers to challenge Soviet interethnic hierarchies as well as the collaborative efforts of evacuated and local cultural elites to mediate the interethnic relations of the Soviet war effort. The title references a 1945 letter from an Uzbek Red Army soldier to a teenage kolkhoz heroine in his native Fergana valley in which used both his given name – Muhamed – and his frontline nickname – Misha. The author's split identification exemplifies the central question of the project, namely how to interpret the Sovietization of war, in what context it was created, and how it endured. It proposes that the Red Army was a flexible, imperial institution yet also a transmission belt for pan-Soviet culture. However, my work also demonstrates that "Central Asianization" occurred as well. And Sovietization was contested and refracted by age, gender, and the urban-rural divide. Despite these limitations, the war

nevertheless created a generation of figurative "Muhamed-Mishas," providing the state with a new foundation of loyal citizens with pan-Soviet perspectives that would endure until the end of the regime and even beyond.

Research Goals: My dissertation research was focused more narrowly on Uzbekistan and was rooted in Moscow and Tashkent archives. However, for both logistical and intellectual reasons for the Title VIII Research Scholar Fellowship I formulated a research strategy that would be regional rather than national.

Although the national frame is essential for understanding Soviet imperial politics, it replicates the region's post-Soviet nationalist historiographies and distorts the reality of the war. Regional and supranational frames are crucial to understanding the war's impact on the Soviet empire and are not adequately considered by researchers. Recent research has emphasized the centrality of physical mobility (or "internal transnationalism") to the Soviet experience and recognized the Soviet Union's reliance on imperial intermediaries who could master national repertoires, but always within the larger Soviet context. My research on Central Asians at war combines these imperatives to observe the simultaneous sanctity of national and pan-Soviet prerogatives that characterized the Soviet identity of the war era. To cite a few examples: while propaganda campaigns such as the "People's Instructions" and national military units comported with republican borders, the mixing of nationalities at the front broke down the sacrality of these lines, leading to regional, multinational, or supranational sensibilities, as in the formula Muhamed-Misha; Tamara Khanum, an ethnic Armenian dancer who portrayed herself as an Uzbek, changed national costumes in rapid succession in concerts at the front, demonstrating both the vitality and superficiality of these categories and that becoming Soviet at war was not a

one-dimensional corridor between the nation and Moscow but about fluency and comfort with national mixing and diversity. Regional identities could also form from survival mechanisms and mutual exclusion, such as the soldiers who gravitated to one another for linguistic and cultural familiarity, some being labeled derisively by their Russian-speaking peers as "Iuldash," "aziat," or "natsmen" (national minority). And Communist Party leadership also thought in regional terms. The Central Asian Military District – which drafted soldiers from five republics – was the only regional military constellation to mobilize draft-eligible men into so-called "labor battalions" to the Urals, a fate shared only with nationalities suspected of Nazi collaboration.

As important as these belts of Sovietization were, they occurred after Central Asian men were mobilized from their homelands or in the rarified world of urban cultural spheres. How were Central Asian men actually drafted into the Red Army? And what sort of "Sovietization" argument could be made about the rural Central Asian homefront, where the overwhelming majority of the region's women actually experienced the war, many of whom subsequently became victims of violence in the postwar retrenchment of a more patriarchal gender order?

Research in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan enables the historian to write an entangled history of the region's republics that will allow both commonalities and variations to become more vivid. Both republics contained significant ethnic Uzbek populations and all three shared the Fergana valley and its cotton kolkhozes, a sector vital for war supplies but which crashed in 1942-43. Yet the mountains and extended foreign borders of the Kyrgyz SSR and Tajik SSR meant greater remove from state procurements and mobilization campaigns, and greater opportunities for evasion and flight than the UzSSR, which was under tighter control from Moscow. My previous research indicates important differences among republics already: for

instance, evacuated and local writers in Stalinabad (Dushanbe) literally did not communicate with each other for the first year and a half of war, in stark contrast to the tense but productive collaborations on Friendship-themed volumes in Tashkent. And scattered references at RGASPI to bands of draft-dodgers and cross-border flight in the Kyrgyz and Tajik SSRs offered tantalizing clues about the real struggles to exert rural state control.

Thus, I came to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with two primary research agendas: first, to study the military draft and, specifically, learn the degree to which the draft burden was welcomed or resisted by rural Central Asians; and second, to ask analogous questions of kolkhoz communities asked to sacrifice physically and reorganize their social orders to produce for the war effort. These two questions are all but impossible to answer due to archival limitations in Moscow and Uzbekistan.

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Temirbai Gaipov, former sniper, 8th Guards (Panfilov) Rifle Division, at his home at sovkhoz "Rovat," Batken district, Kyrgyz SSR. Photo undated. Courtesy of TsGA KFFD KR.

Research Activities: I spent three months based in Bishkek and about one in Dushanbe, a ratio determined by my concerns about the unpredictability of research conditions in Tajikistan that were ultimately well-founded.

My first prerogative in Bishkek was to consult the personal funds of World War II veterans located at the Central State archive (TsGA KR). However, I learned that these the materials were written primarily in the 1970s to celebrate discreet acts of heroism and therefore offer little insight about everyday soldierly life and are strictly patriotic in their avoidance of sensitive questions, such as national culture and ethnic relations, language, or religion in the Red

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Army. I did discover the life's work of one veteran to build a museum to "military glory" of his division, which he hoped to build by soliciting his comrades in arms for paraphernalia, reminiscences, professional achievements, and advice to younger generations. The custodianship of the cult of World War II in the late-Soviet era is an interesting story, but one outside the current purview of the book.

The collections at the Communist Party archive (TsGA OPD KR) were rich, accessible, and more reflective of my research imperatives. However, researchers should know that recent staff changes have meant a loss of institutional memory and a concomitant lack of organization and finding aids that can impede easy progress. My first priority was to understand how the Kyrgyz were mobilized and then demobilized from the war. Using the Communist Party's military department and "special sector" files, I gained a ground-level understanding about the struggle to mobilize cadres, fight against desertion, and then to integrate veterans back into productive labor after the war.

My second priority was to identify kolkhoz- and sovkhoz-level documents to tell a rural history of the war effort, given that this is where the majority of Central Asians spent the war years. Several eye-glazing days of reading files from the Ministry of Agriculture and a weekend bicycle trip to Naryn (formerly Tian Shan) region was enough to recognize the importance of providing a few small microhistorical studies to ground the history of kolkhoz life in more vivid brushstrokes or risk reproducing a mountain of impersonal data that would shroud stories of true heroism and sacrifice. Consequently, I concentrated my readings on a mountainous, sparsely-populated border region near China, the pasturelands of Naryn, and a densely-populated cotton district near Osh.

Although I had not intended to do much research on the deportation and settlement of Chechens, Ingush, and other "disloyal" peoples, the archival evidence I found will likely force me to change the shape of my book a little.

Through a serendipitous discovery from a local contact, I discovered autobiographical materials shedding light on the experience of native Kyrgyz prisoners of war who later became drafted into the Wehrmacht's Turkestan Legion. I later took a short research trip to Jumgal district with the same contact. This area was home to some of the most challenging episodes of the Central Asian homefront, including significant starvation and outmigration, draft desertion, and the activization of "basmachi" bands (i.e. deserters with guns). In a series of interviews, I hoped to determine the degree to which a specific local memory culture exists that might mitigate against the predominant popular memory about the war. My contact was also able to speak with several family members of one of the most prominent members of the Turkestan Legion, Satar Almambetov, and acquire a copy of his only known photograph. We conducted four interviews over two days, and while I cannot consider any of these interviews to have provided exceedingly new material, I hope they will find reflection in my book or in article form.

I concluded my research in Bishkek with a visit to the film and photo archive where I gained a useful batch of photos to serve as book illustrations. The staff here was helpful and the collection well-organized, however, I would recommend future researchers to try to bargain down the staff from the rather exorbitant fees they charge to foreign citizens.

My research trip to Dushanbe was productive but shorter than I had hoped due to the unexpected closure of archival access to me. Courtesy of the tireless efforts of American

Councils' representatives in Dushanbe, I gained local affiliation with the Tajikistan Academy of Sciences and, subsequently, research access to both the Tajikistan state archive (TsGA RT) and, unexpectedly, the former Party archive, now the archive of contemporary history (TsGA NI RT).

My work at the state archive was a mixed bag. As in Bishkek, I was surprised to find that the Tajik SSR's writers' union left behind almost no archival trace from the war years. I was similarly frustrated in my search to find traces of one of the major war-time building projects, the Hisor canal, which linked the Tajik and Uzbek SSRs, though I did find an interesting glossy volume of photos from the project from its beginning in 1940. The archive also has a uniquely wide-ranging collection of interviews and personal photos from war veterans that were compiled in the late 1970s and 1980s. Although possessing many of the same limitations as the analogous collections in Bishkek, the sheer size of this collection would have merited more study had I been granted more time in the archives.

At the nearby film and photo archive I found the collections to be in disarray but the staff to be accommodating. Through their efforts, I was able to track down a copy of the documentary film from 1977 that helped inspire my dissertation project, *Far Beyond the Distant Horizon* (dir. Yusupova), about an ethnic Lokai from southern Tajikistan who was called up to the war in 1942 and eventually wound up among Italian partisans before making his way through many obstacles back to Tajikistan. I look forward to sharing this copy with Pulat Akhmatov, the Moscow-based screenwriter of the film who shared its details with me back in 2011. At the end of my trip I was also able to search the collection of Soviet-era documentary films about the Great Patriotic War at Tajikfilm, the state film studios. Although its film archive is incomplete and in disarray, it did allow me to obtain an array of interesting documentary films, such as *Tajik Film-concert* (1943),

Old Khiva (1931), and *The Capture of Ibragim Bek* (1931), that I look forward to sharing with students. Importantly, it contained a copy of *Wounds* (1990), Akhmatov's passion project on the human costs of war told about Tajikistan's wounded veterans. Its Perestroika-era frankness about the toils of war stands in sharp contrast to the renewed myth of unambiguous Victory in modern Russia and Tajikistan.

My most important gains were made at the former Party archive, which is housed in a dilapidated building in the center of Dushanbe that will either be demolished or collapse on its own in the near future. I may have been the first or second foreigner to use this archive, so although the staff was highly welcoming to me on a personal level (insisting on sharing their lunch and tea with me), they were highly guarded and even paranoid about sharing files, and were unwilling to let me see finding aids on my own. Instead, I had to dictate my interests to them and they determined which files I was allowed to see. This was highly inefficient, but it did result in discoveries that ought to allow for productive integration with my materials from Kyrgyzstan. First, I was able to gain a companion picture of the rural draft effort. Second, there were copious materials about the Central Asian labor army mobilized both to the Urals and around the Tajik SSR. Finally, the records for the Party's Department for Work Among Women was in better shape than in Bishkek.

My work was cut short when I was summoned to the office of the head of the Tajikistan state archival agency and informed that I needed permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to conduct further archival work, which cannot be easily or quickly acquired. This seems to be a stipulation that can always be made for a foreign researcher whose presence may make the archives' civil servants uncomfortable. I believe this was more result of bad luck than due to

encountering politically sensitive materials and I am happy to describe my experience in greater detail to other scholars interested in working in Tajikistan.

There was one silver lining, however. I had previously not prioritized the personal archive of a Soviet-era historian and author, Rakhman Safarov, whose family had donated his papers to the Academy of Sciences' Institute of History upon his passing. It turned out that Safarov was a prodigious writer of biographies of Tajik war veterans who had earned the status of Heroes of the Soviet Union. The combination of his own diaries and work notes plus the biographies he wrote of the war heroes ought to link up naturally with the materials on late-Soviet war memory culture from the Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan state archives and will hopefully form the basis of a future article or two.

Important Research Findings: A research trip that alters one's conclusions and the contours of a book can only be considered a success. On the mesoscopic level, the arguments of almost all of my chapters will be tweaked and I will also likely add two unanticipated chapters. Finally, on a macroscopic level, I am even more convinced of the utility a regional perspective and now have the happy challenge of integrating the new findings.

The most important unanswered question going into this research had been about the draft of Central Asians into the Red Army which, more than anything else, was a litmus test of the Soviet regime's legitimacy, particularly as it hemorrhaged territory in the first two years of war. Two important findings emerged. First, although I was aware that there were different draft regimes for "Europeans" and local nationals, I was surprised to see the extent of civilian awareness of this disparity. In Tajikistan I even found evidence of efforts to conduct a "secret

draft" for European nationalities in autumn 1941. Second, I discovered ample evidence of desertion and other forms of draft evasion from rural populations in both republics, including complaints that rural non-Russian elites often had a hand in assisting and harboring draft-dodgers. I even discovered several examples of explicit anti-draft resistance in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan that resulted in loss of life of local NKVD functionaries. Because these factors were ironed out of the standard Soviet war myth of universal service, little research exists on desertion and the split draft policies. Nevertheless, my findings suggest that the percentages of draft evasion and desertion in Central Asia was higher than in European Russia, which paints the

Draftees en route to draft collection point near Tokmak (Kyrgyz SSR), 1942. Courtesy of TsGA KFFD KR.

regime as being in a more precarious position than I had previously imagined. This complicates but ultimately strengthens my book's overall argument about the war as an integrator of Central Asians within the Soviet community, for it shows the cultural and political distance to be traversed by so many of the Ivan-Uzbeks, Ivan-Tajiks, and Ivan-Kyrgyzs.

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My second main prerogative had been to gain a picture of rural Central Asia at war, in part to counterbalance the story of integration at the front and in order to understand how the majority of Central Asians experienced the era. Especially in Bishkek, I was able to reconstruct the tactics of the Party-state to hector, encourage, plead, and inspire local people to perform extreme acts of selfless labor, even when this brought damage to their own personal health and well-being. Reading between the lines, these documents also reveal the tactics of individual farmers and kolkhoz leaders to protect themselves and their flocks from the most rapacious state campaigns to give to the front. Where individual will ends and compulsion begins is very difficult to determine. Being attuned to factors such as the isolation of villages, the donations of warm clothing and furs to the Red Army (including all manner of usable and unusable hides), and the exhaustion and loss of horses and other livestock will, hopefully, provide a nuanced sense of struggle between the needs of local survival and the requirements to devote "all for the front." It also impels me to re-examine the literature on collectivization and rural resistance since I can now see many parallels between these two eras of rapacious state procurement campaigns.

As part of the rural story, I prioritized the Party's women's department in both republics. The emergent pictures shows how the war forced the state into the lives of rural women more than ever before, as wives of soldiers were forced to appeal to receive financial payments and subsidies on war taxes. In addition, it is clear that the Party had to adopt a split line of mobilizational tactics. On the one hand, it encouraged the creation of female tractor brigades, which challenged locally held gender norms. On the other, it celebrated motherhood, and the campaigns to reward "hero-mothers" were greeted with "great approval, especially among women of local nationalities," since they implicitly supported traditional family practices and

gender norms. In one document from Tajikistan I found evidence of women being encouraged to throw down their *paranjas* (head coverings) to engage in productive work, thus bearing out my suspicion that the war can be seen as a successor period to the Hujum (attack) on veils from the late 1920s. My reading of this situation as a split picture – of celebrating both "progressive" and "traditional" gender ideals – had initially vexed me for being too ambiguous and therefore unconvincing. However, I remain more convinced than ever about the war's particular imperative to make the Party appeal to all forms of agitation at its disposal.

I had not intended to write a chapter on the deportation of Chechens and Ingush to Kyrgyzstan in 1944 but the discovery of some granular accounts on the failures to integrate the settlers in kolkhozes, as well as a comprehensive document collection published recently in Bishkek may enable me to make some new insights into this morbid chapter of the war. The deportations to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan have usually been described as punitive acts of almost genocidal proportions committed by the central Soviet state, or as a massively inefficient method to mobilize new labor on the homefront (Tajik SSR leaders even lobbied, unsuccessfully, to be a site of resettlement). High mortality rates are usually explained by disease, weather, and the authorities' conscious refusal to provide adequate clothing and food during the deportation process. Any conflicts with the local population are usually considered episodic and counterbalanced by the generous and humane relations extended by many Central Asian civilian populations. There was indeed a great variety of outcomes for deported peoples, largely dependent on the decisions made by district-level party and state leaders. However, I have found that mistreatment of evacuees was more than episodic and the extent that local populations were guilty of physical abuse and conscious theft of food and housing materials

earmarked for settlers will require a more complicated explanation for special settler mortality and questions of local participation and accountability.

Another new chapter will bring to light the experience of Central Asian prisoners of war who were drafted into the Wehrmacht's Turkestan Legion. The discovery of several autobiographical texts will hopefully shed light on how the Turkestan Legion was able to recruit Central Asian prisoners, how local kin and friend networks continued to be vital among Central Asians in these units, how Legioneers eventually found their way back to the Soviet Union, and how they handled the stigma of being labeled "traitors" as they resumed civilian life. One of these autobiographical sources was written in several different political moments, allowing me the opportunity to ask how the answers to these questions changed over time.

Policy Implications and Recommendations: As at the outset of my research, I remain convinced that the legacy of World War II is a missed opportunity for Russian policymakers, just as it provides limited but useful opportunities for U.S. diplomacy in the region.

Remittances from the hundreds of thousands of Central Asian labor migrants in contemporary Russia help to keep the economies of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan afloat and provide Russia with much-needed labor. Many labor migrants choose Russia (rather than Turkey or Korea) not simply due to visa-free travel and cheap flights, although these are significant. Rather, common culture, history, and language facilitate the journeys, labor, and adaptation to Russian cities. The mix of xenophobia, radicalization, and recent acts of terror in Russian cities offer caution about the dangers of migration without sufficient cultural support. Contemporary migration patterns have roots in World War II and a deeper understanding of the

war's constitutive role for actors in the region will help U.S. policy makers to better understand the prospects of violence in Russia and assess American interests in Central Asia.

A vital result of the multinational war effort was the creation of a self-styled "Soviet people," an ethnically diverse but Russian-speaking community of Victors that would return home and form the pillars of the state, including in rural corners of Central Asia. However, this multinational unity was not without failures. The first two years of war witnessed interethnic tension, miscommunication, violence, and high rates of desertion especially among non-Russian minorities. The Red Army responded by rooting the Nazi threat and military oath in familiar language and cultural terms and appointing a layer of native-language political officers to teach combat basics and agitprop in non-Russian languages while also offering Russian instruction. These campaigns were justified under the ideology of Friendship of the Peoples, a valorization of Soviet multiethnicity in the face of Nazi racism, though still a model predicated on Russian-led hierarchy. And to assist soldiers and civilians to internalize the messages of Friendship, cultural intermediaries in the form of dancers, singers, and film heroes introduced previously obscure national cultures to new audiences.

Contemporary labor migration replicates many war-era dynamics. Like the "labor battalions" in the Urals and Siberia, today's migrants live segregated from Russians. As during the war, there exists no native-language cultural support and few cultural intermediaries, excluding Russia's ubiquitous *plov* restaurants which perpetuate Soviet notions of national culture. Most important, there is no rhetorical model of integration. Friendship of Peoples was hierarchical yet demanded peaceable relations and celebrated diversity. In its place the Russian state offers little except for the occasional reminder of its status as a Federation, which is

drowned out by persistent xenophobia. Without a rhetorical script or governing ideology to explain the presence of Central Asian migrants in Russian cities, the last decade has experienced a rise in violence against "blacks." Interestingly, one can witness the informal assimilatory strategies of Central Asians themselves, such as using shortened, Slavic-sounding versions of their names, or by emphasizing common values and history, especially by donning the striped St. George's ribbon during Victory Day celebrations, an assertion of belonging rooted in the blood of their grandfathers.

Unless the Russian state finds a language to justify the presence of labor migrants in its cities, interethnic volatility and Central Asian radicalization in Russia will continue. The war legacy is a missed opportunity for the Russian state, which has made peremptory efforts to remember the war's multinational character but ultimately decided that the legitimizing benefits of Victory Day are too sweet to share. For U.S. policymakers in Central Asia, it is important to appreciate the cultural and historical ties that still hem the region to Russia and set a realistic course for its own cultural work, though they might suggest to the region's leaders that encouraging Russian-language learning and embracing their own histories of war more directly would benefit their citizens without relinquishing sovereignty. These conversations can be profitably begun with a recollection about our common anti-Nazi alliance that Central Asian war veterans never failed to remind me of.

Co-Curricular Activity: Throughout my time in the field I greatly benefitted from the expertise from local scholars. In particular, in Kyrgyzstan I benefitted from the archival expertise and generosity of Narynbek Alymkulov, a historian at the National University of Kyrgyzstan who is completing a book on Kyrgyzstan during World War II. At his invitation I presented a paper

based on new research at a conference at the Kyrgyzstan Academy of Sciences entitled "Chingiz Aitmatov and his perception of the Kyrgyz village during the World War II."

In Tajikistan I greatly benefitted from my affiliation at the Tajikistan Academy of Sciences' Institute of History. Professor Abdullo Gafurov shared his knowledge of local sources and introduced me to one of his former students, who made a documentary film on Tajik labor battalions during World War II. Institute director Zikriyo Akrami supported my archival work and, when it soured, encouraged me to use the personal archive of Rakhman Safarov.

While in Tajikistan I reached out to the U.S. Embassy staff with a suggestion for a donation of technology to the Tajikistan state archive that could have facilitated more normal research conditions for U.S. citizens but was a bit surprised at their lack of interest. I think it would behoove the Embassy staff to consult with American scholars to find sensible ways to facilitate research work in the country.

The author, cemetery in Jumgal district (Kyrgyzstan), November 2018. Photo courtesy: Daniyar Isanov.

Conclusions: As I transform this research into a book, the primary challenge will be to reconcile one strain of my argument – that emphasizes integration and "Sovietization" – with new strands that reveal rural resistance, draft evasion, and the persistence of conservative rural social norms. Although at first glance these trajectories contradict one another, they may ultimately help to provide an origin story for late Soviet Central Asian society, which was characterized by cultural divisions between Russian-speaking urban centers that shared much with other Soviet landscapes, and more culturally conservative rural corners. Ultimately, I hope to show that one of the linking threads between these worlds was a common experience of sacrifice in the war.

Another as yet unresolved question is how to characterize this work. In adding archival research from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to my base in Uzbekistan, what sort of regional history have I created? Is it strictly comparative? Is it "entangled," to use a concept favored by historians? Ultimately archival limitations in each country make a true "apple-to-apple-to-apple" comparison impossible. I will be subject to the fair challenge of what, for instance, draft challenges in Kyrgyzstan can reveal about the similar issue in Uzbekistan. Ultimately, without claiming that the events in one republic *de facto* happened in another, I hope that the book will allow me to gesture towards a common set of experiences undergirding this region's experience at war, while always making clear the importance of variation from one locality to another.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications: I plan to incorporate much of this archival research in two upcoming articles, the first looking at the mobilization of Central Asian laborers in the context of imperial mobility; the second on the role of cultural intermediaries between Central Asia and the Soviet center during World War II. In addition, I plan to write two articles based entirely on new findings. The first will examine the multiple

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iterations of a Turkestan Legion veteran's autobiographical writings. The second will focus squarely on the question of the draft and the problem of desertion in rural Central Asia. And the primary goal will be to complete a full draft manuscript of my book project on Central Asia during World War II.

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