



Forced migration in Soviet Russia through Russian literature

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Abstract

Going through world history one often encounters instances of migration. The humankind has migrated for better access to land water and other resources all over the world, but the trend of Migration as tool in politics to remove certain ethnicities or a specific group of people has plagued us in the last few centuries. Deportation of Chechen and Ingush and other ethnicities, Dekulakization, Gulag camps, and exile of various people are some examples of forced migration in Russia. In this paper, the image of forced migration has been depicted through Russian literary works. The study also throws light on why migration which happened in the XX century still has its relevancy as theme in contemporary Russian literature. Analysis of the theme of forced migration is done through literary work such as "The Inseparable Twins" by Anatoly Pristavkin; 'The collapse' by Issa Kodzoev; "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" by Guzel Yakhina has been given. The study also shows that Many themes and topics which were off-limits in soviet times have appeared in mainstream discussions. Many people who did not had a voice are now telling how those oppressions impacted them and their future generations.

Keywords: Forced migration, contemporary Russian literature, ethnic conflict, gulag, Dekulakization, Exile, Zuleikha opens her eyes, The inseparable twins.

Migration as a phenomenon has existed throughout the history of mankind, nomads used to migrate from one place to another in search of food and shelter. Slowly they started to settle near rivers and other natural resources, which became home to most human civilizations. As the population grew humans settled across the globe but they still migrated for bigger land and resources. In recent times humans even started migrating for better jobs and opportunities. In the last few centuries, a different type of migration started emerging i.e., forced migration. Words like forced Migration, forced displacement, resettlement are all connected and these are often used interchangeably. Forced migration is when people unwillingly leave their homeland because of external reasons. There can be many reasons for example natural calamities like earthquakes; ecological

problems like sea level rising; development of infrastructure like making of dams; man-made disaster like nuclear power plants accidents, slavery, and human trafficking; lastly the most important i.e., politics.

Politics has resulted in thousands of people being forcefully migrated, in some cases, they are displaced from one place to another by the government order and some people are even resettled in particular areas accordingly. That's why many times forced displacement and resettlement are used in place of forced migration. All this is done against some particular section of society. People of any minority are often under threat to be displaced by majoritarian politics. This has happened throughout the world. From native Americans to Jews of Germany and Russia, people were forced to leave their homeland. During the establishment of Greek and Turkish territory, and the partition of India into India and Pakistan people were forced to migrate from one part to another. Russia as a country has its fair share of such forced migration. Deportation of Chechen and Ingush and other ethnicities, Dekulakization of Kulaks¹, Gulag camps and the exile of various people are some of the most famous examples of it.² On the surface forced migration seems to be only affecting a group of people, but it is a phenomenon that affects various generations of forcefully migrated people. As they not only leave their home, they are separated from their cultural heritage, traditions, source of income, and most often friends and family. These forced migrations happen in a way that many people even lose their lives during the process.

During the 20th century the Soviet Union through their government policies forced thousands of people to migrate. There are many literary works that talk about these troubled times, they focus on different things from experiences of children to old people, from women to men, and also its effect on various ethnicities. In the literature from 20th century focus was on, how the general public was affected. Whereas looking at the works related to forced migration from 21st we see many examples of people from various ethnicities talking about their experience during the last century. Many of these people were not able to write about their struggles there was heavy censoring during the Soviet period.

The first work we are studying is "The Inseparable Twins"(1981) by Anatoly Pristavkin. The work is about twin orphan brothers, how was their life when people were being displaced to the Caucasus. Anatoly Pristavkin himself was an orphan and often wrote about the condition of children especially from orphanages. He was one of the first writers who spoke about the consequences of the displacement of Chechens from their homeland. Pristavkin used to write about simpler things but became an advocate of liberal values when the Soviet Union collapsed.

"Pristavkin can be viewed as a barometer of the shifting cultural climate. In 1967 a Soviet reviewer of his novel Golubka noted that the work "continues his stories about builders, steeplejacks, engineers, hospital nurses, party workers and geologists", but did not rise to a new level. Yet assessment of Pristavkin changed

¹ "Kulak, (Russian: "fist"), in Russian and Soviet history, a wealthy or prosperous peasant, generally characterized as one who owned a relatively large farm and several heads of cattle and horses and who was financially capable of employing hired labor and leasing land. At the end of 1929 a campaign to "liquidate the kulaks as a class" ("dekulakization") was launched by the government." Encyclopedia Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/topic/kulak>

² Kurt Christopher, 23 Aug 2017, Forced Out: The 10 Largest Forced Migrations in Human History, <https://historycollection.co/ten-largest-forced-migrations-human-history/>

radically with the appearance of his outstanding novel *A Golden Cloud Spent the Night*, known in English as *The Inseparable Twins*. ”³

In the book Sasha and Kolka are two Russian orphans who find themselves on a journey to the Caucasus after they were found stealing in the orphanage; these young hungry boys were promised better home and food in the Caucasus. They were betrayed as they were sent on days’ worth of the journey with little to nothing eat; survival on the way itself was a tough job. They somehow reached the Caucasus and started living their life. It wasn’t easy they were managing then suddenly the order for deportation of Chechens came out.

Their place of living was burnt by Chechens, there were military everywhere so they went on run not knowing how to handle this situation. Sasha and Kolka were searching for food and Chechens attacked them they were separated and later when Kolka finds Sasha, he was brutally killed and made into a scarecrow. The writer has given a soul-shattering picture of Sasha’s dead body. Kolka still takes his brother along his journey on a cart. He then meets Alkhuzur a Chechen boy who was also an orphan and struggling in between this war. In the end, Kolka somehow finds his way to a Russian childcare establishment again but instead of Sasha he now has Alkhuzur as his brother.

Denis Panichkin in his article says this work shows that “*one’s happiness cannot be built upon other misfortune.*” Kolka and Sasha represent the Russian people, how even they suffered during this war against Chechens. He recalls this forced migration shameful act, which led to the suffering of millions of Russian and Chechens alike.⁴

This story is about Chechen and Russian children, who became orphans due to all these endless conflicts in Russia. So many children died during these times. These children who were supposed to be the future were burnt by the flames of greed of adults. They were left with scars which would probably never heal. Pristavkin himself was an example as he was never able to forget the struggles he went through.

At that time Nobel laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s two works *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) gained a lot of popularity all around the world. They were about life of Russians in GULAG camps, how their own people suffered in exile. There was less attention given towards the stories of people from other ethnicities, who were being deported and resettled. These people were also sent in exile and forced to live in inhumane conditions.

Only a few works were written “*The inseparable twin*” and “*Bread for the Dog*” (1970) by Vladimir Tendryakov are namely two works which became famous. These stories are heart-wrenching as we see people in deep hunger and surviving with bare minimum supplies. In “*Bread for the Dog*” we see the plight of a child who doesn’t know how to share food when everyone around him is starving and dying without food during deportation of Kulaks.

³Porter Robert, 14 Aug 2008, Muted Soviet novelist who blossomed into a champion of liberalism, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/aug/14/pristavkin.anatolii.obituary>

⁴Panichkin Denis, About the story of A.I. Pristavkin *The Inseparable Twins*, 2019 <https://proza.ru/2019/02/23/744>

During the Dekulakization of Kulaks in 1929-32 and the Deportation of Chechen and Ingush in 1944, millions were uprooted, millions lost their lives. Kulaks, Chechens, Ingush and several other ethnicities were told to leave their homes at once. They were given little to no time to leave their homes. Many people lost their lives on the way to the exile, as they were not prepared for such a long journey and cold in Siberia was unforgiving.

We get to know more about their experiences as in 21st century many people started writing about that time, some of them were survivors themselves and some were writing from experience of family and others. Some wrote fact-based and some wrote fiction. "I Am a Chechen!" (2006) German Sadulaev, "The collapse" (2007) by Issa Kodzoev; "Crimean Tatars, or Greetings from Stalin!" (2009) by Venera Yakupova and "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" (2015) by Guzel Yakhina are few such works.

'The collapse' (2007) by Issa Kodzoev is a story about struggle of Ingush people during 1944's forced migration. The novel gives us accounts of various people who after finding the government order of deportation didn't just leave, they decided to fight back for their land. These people became Abrek⁵ a term which is used in a negative meaning of bandit by Russians but for Chechen and Ingush people they were 'Avenger' who fought for people's pride. In the novel we see old, sick and disable people were killed even before giving a chance to resettle. Things were looted from these ethnicities and their homes were broken. There are stories of how places of religious and traditional importance were demolished. Their heritage was being destroyed which angered the brave Ingush Men and women. Here is an excerpt from the novel where these Abrek say-

*'They are Ingush national Army and they will save their country. And if asked what is there to save if all people are exiled. Here are the cemeteries of our ancestors. First duty is we must save them. Bones of our mothers and fathers need peace.'*⁶

Many simple people who never held a weapon decided to fight for Ingush pride. A Muslim priest who spent his life teaching good sermons and helping others. His village was destroyed and people were killed on the day of deportation; he was on the verge of being killed but he somehow survives. He later learns the ways of Abreks and joins them. There is a law university student forced to runaway just because he was an Ingush. The woman who married him, she was humiliated and tortured, even when she was a student of medicine. There is a Russian orphan who finds family in an Ingush home and then this whole family was killed; so, he too joins Abreks. The author gives us many such stories.

Issa Kodzoev the writer of this work himself is a well-known Ingush writer, poet, as well as a prominent public and political activist. He was born in 1938 in the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. He was five years old when he and his family were deported to Kazakhstan. His entire family died during the exile, resulting in him growing up in an orphanage. In many of his works he writes the stories of

⁵ Lemka T. AGIEVA Abrechestvo as a Form of Social Protest [ABRECHESTVO.KAKODNAIZFORMSOCIALNOGOPROTESTA \(cyberleninka.ru\)](http://ABRECHESTVO.KAKODNAIZFORMSOCIALNOGOPROTESTA (cyberleninka.ru))

⁶«Мы – Ингушская Народная армия. Нас оставили здесь защищать Родину... Мне могут возразить: а что здесь защищать, если весь наш народ изгнан? Есть что защищать. Здесь остались могилы наших предков. Первым долгом мы должны их защищать. Костям наших матерей и отцов нужен покой.» KodzoevIssa, 2007, "Thecollapse" Pilgrim, Najranpg.80

the deported Ingush and Chechens. He still actively participates in political activities to restore the autonomy of the Ingush. In this article from 2018 they write about how he is trying to get attention to the anguish of Ingush people who are slowly losing their land. How the effects of deportation still haunt the Ingush people.

“On October 9, the video was posted on the Rustam Leimoev's channel in YouTube. In the video, Issa Kodzoev demonstrates a map which shows the territory in which the Ingush people lived until 1944. The writer reports which areas Ingushetia lost since then. "I want not only the Ingush and Chechen people, but also other North-Caucasian peoples to know why the Ingush residents rose to defend their territory," Issa Kodzoev said. Meanwhile, he called the protest in Magas a spontaneous action. "We also need the land to live on," Issa Kodzoev concluded.”⁷

For people like Issa Kodzoev the deportation resulted in a life full of struggles, loss of home and peace. He saw his family, friends and everything loved by him getting destroyed even when 1957 the exile ended Ingushetia, as he knew was lost. To the extent that they are still struggling for Ingush rights. Issa Kodzoev and his son have been arrested several times for it.

Lastly a book which garnered attention from all over the world the debut novel of Guzel Yakhina "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes". Written in 2015 the book has been translated in 20+ languages and it's still popular. This work is about Zuleikha a kulak woman who was displaced during Dekulakization in 1929-1932. Although it is a story of one woman and how she survives that troubled period; she stands as a representative of women's struggles during resettlement. It's for the first-time stories of Tatar woman was given a voice.

Zuleikha a simple woman who didn't had her own identity, who lived and worked all for her family. Suddenly one day government orders about Dekulakization came and they are told to leave their home. When her husband tries to fight, he is killed and she is told to leave immediately. The homeland where she lived all of her life the home she builds with her husband; she has to leave all that and has to be alone. Women at that time were homely and were not allowed in outside world; they were to live under protection of men. Zuleikha had lived all her life like that and now she had to fight for her life. Story of Zuleikha although is a work of fiction; but it has basis on reality. As Guzel Yakhina says the character is based on her grandmother. The heroine Zuleikha was also pregnant, during pregnancy she had to handle a long journey and she had to live without any food.

“Two tiers of bunks are crowded with people. Others sit on crates, on heaps of old clothes, and on the floor. There are so many people that there's nowhere to move to... Sometimes it seems she is already dead. The people around her are emaciated, pale, and spend entire days whispering and quietly weeping: so who are they if not the dead? This place – frigid and crowded, the stone walls wet from damp, deep under the ground, without a single ray of sun – what is it if not a burial vault? Only when Zuleikha makes her way to

⁷Caucasian Knot, 10 Oct 2018, Issa Kodzoev speaks about lands lost by Ingush people since 1944 Source: <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/44675/>

the latrine, a large, echoing tin bucket in the corner of the cell, and feels her cheeks warm with shame is she convinced that, no, she is still alive. The dead do not know shame."⁸

Kulaks from all over Russia were sent to Siberia as they were declared as class enemies; they were transferred in freight trains. Guzel Yakhina gives us a picture of how bad their condition was throughout the journey. They were barely given food, they spent days without food and water. The train wagons were unhygienic and filled with people to brim. So many people were trying to be on these train, as many kulaks who were couldn't leave were killed. As people went on this, months long journey to Siberia, many died of hunger and diseases. Many died of cold as they were not habitual of it. Many got sick because they were starved, dirty and freezing. Even when they reached Siberia there was no preparation there for them to get resettled. They were left on uninhabited land to fend for themselves. Life in the resettlement was not easy they went to gather food from forest where not many things grew, they were fishing and hunting to collect as much as they could. They had to build house as they couldn't survive winter there without shelter. This article summarizes the plight of displaced people from the novel:

*"Zuleikha is soon packed on a crowded train with a group of other kulaks and her blind and deaf mother-in-law, deemed too old to survive the journey, is left behind to die...Of the over eight hundred "enemies of the people" originally on Zuleikha's train, only about half survive the train journey. Most of the remaining survivors drown when the boat they are taking down the river into the Siberian wilderness sinks, leaving only a dozen people alive, including Zuleikha and Ignatov."*⁹

In a historical book "Against Their Will 'The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR'" by Pavel Polian written in early 2000; the author gives extensive detail how many people from so many regions were uprooted and forced to migrate in various places. Novelist Ruta Sepetys wrote her debut novel "Between Shades of Gray" about deportation of Lithuanian people and resettlement in Siberia; and it becoming a New York Times Best Seller of 2011. A tele serial-based Guzel Yakhina's "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" was made in 2020.

We can see through these three works and several others that life during those times was very tough. All these forced migrations resulted in deaths of many due to starvation, people were left to live in inhumane condition and to freeze in cold Siberia. Many people fought and lost life; some sacrificed for the honour of motherland. All their stories are still a topic of discussion in Russia. These policies have changed history of people and geography of their land. So much heritage and history were lost; through these writing we are reminded of their existence. The author Guzel Yakhina says,

*"Then the book was published, and I suddenly started getting letters from people who recognized their grandmother in Zuleikha. I got letters from people who'd gone through the experience of exile."*¹⁰

⁸Yakhina Guzel, 2019, Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes, Oneworld Publications. Pg. 94-96

⁹ Solomon Kat 06 Nov 2020 "Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes" <https://blog.pshares.org/zuleikha-opens-her-eyes/>

¹⁰Tabarovsky Izabella June 13, 2019, Forging Hope in Exile: Interview with Guzel Yakhina, author of Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/forging-hope-exile-interview-guzel-yakhina-author-zuleikha-opens-her-eyes>

It's worth noting that in recent time people are revisiting their past and trying to address the issues on which attention was not paid before. Novel of Guzel Yakhina became centre of attraction as she talked about a Tatar Muslim woman. There is barely any literature written in Soviet times about woman during of forced migration. At the same time for people like Issa Kodzoev writing these stories is matter of socio-political importance. The author is not writing just to visit past; he writes because past has moulded his reality. As he said that maps of Ingush territories have changed after the forced migration and Ingushetia is still not stabilized because of conflict between Russian and Ingush powers.¹¹

We can say that the issue of forced migration is very much prevalent in contemporary Russian literature as well as Russian society. It's important for us to study migration as theme in contemporary literature; as people who suffered, they and their future generations are till date bearing the consequences of these forced migrations.

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¹¹ Issa Kodzoev: stabilization in ingushetia will start after removal of special units from its territory July 18, 2010 Waynakh online <https://www.waynakh.com/eng/2010/07/issa-kodzoev-stabilization-in-ingushetia-will-start-after-removal-of-special-units-from-its-territory/>