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"To Grant the Right of Asylum"

Political Migration as a Relation and the Soviet Making of Politemigrant*, 1918–1961*

Yevhenii Monastyrskyi | ORCID: 0000-0001-9598-5719
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA
ymonastyrskyi@fas.harvard.edu

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Abstract

The Soviet Union granted asylum to tens of thousands of foreigners, yet the state could not on its own make someone a *politemigrant*. I argue that political migration to the Soviet Union was a relation sustained by the divided authority of the state, which granted asylum, and the party, which could vouch for the migrant. Tracing this "two-key asylum" from 1918 to 1961 through commission records and individual cases, the article shows how belonging outweighed formal measures of persecution, and how recognition became a revocable obligation. After the Comintern's dissolution in 1943, authority passed to the Soviet Communist Party and the Red Cross. The 1961 statute assigned the determination of belonging to a Red Cross commission while retaining the requirement of party permission. This history brings Soviet asylum into 20th-century refugee history through the question of who could determine a migrant's standing.

Keywords

asylum – Soviet Union – political migration – conceptual history – refugee history

On the afternoon of 4 April 1958, during yet another meeting on the repatriation of Germans from the Soviet Union, West German envoy Rolf Lahr, who led the delegation, raised the question of German political migrants. Vladimir Semenov, the Soviet deputy foreign minister, opposed any reference to them

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in the joint communiqué. For the Soviet side, he explained, the matter carried "a slight aftertaste" (*einen kleinen Beigeschmack*).[1] "I have many friends among the political migrants," Semenov said. "I would not want to jeopardize my relations with them. You should be satisfied with my assurance that we have neither detained such persons in the past nor will detain them in the future, should they wish to leave."[2] Lahr found Semenov's explanation difficult to grasp, and translation was not the problem. The agreement, initialed four days later, contained neither an explanation nor any definition of the category itself. Where the negotiations had concerned political migrants, the final document stated only that "what matters is the possession of German citizenship as of 21 June 1941."[3] The term "political migrants" (*politemigranty*) was absent. The word Semenov did use, though, was "relations."

Semenov had worked on Soviet-German affairs for nearly two decades by then and had returned to Moscow in 1954 from East Berlin, where he had served as Soviet High Commissioner. His circle included Germans who had been granted political asylum in the Soviet Union, and whom the Soviet side was nonetheless reluctant to repatriate to West Germany. The reluctance was grounded, among other reasons, in the fact that many of those Germans had taken Soviet citizenship, and their repatriation to the "capitalist" country could have been read as a negative evaluation of the country that had sheltered them. A date had replaced a category: an apparent clarification that explained nothing. Introducing the "political migrant" at the negotiating table was to address a concept that had been developed, debated, and redefined over the previous forty years, and named a relation, a relation between a person, the party that could vouch for them, and the state that might permit them to stay. The people Semenov would not name were the result of arrangements made in the early days of the Soviet state. A few years prior to this meeting, in November 1955, the Soviet Red Cross told the Central Committee that more than thirty thousand political migrants were living in the USSR, though the real number was much higher because no accurate accounting existed, as the letter confessed. Migrants had begun arriving before the category even existed to receive them: the status was first defined in November 1922, and men and women were still being recognized or refused, name by name, in the 1960s. There is no history of the 20th-century refuge and asylum that counts for them.[4]

1 Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (PA AA), B 130-VS-REG/5524A, Aufzeichnung über ein Gespräch zwischen Lahr und Semjonow, April 4, 1958, 8–9.

2 Ibid., 9.

3 Ibid., Schlußsitzung der beiden Regierungsdelegationen, Anlage III, April 8, 1958.

4 The 1922 statute of the *Obshchestvo vzaimopomoshchi politėmigrantam* holds the earliest def-

1 "Who Should Be Considered a Political Migrant?": The Missing Half of Refugee History

At the foundation of the Soviet asylum system lay a distinction that the historiography of refugeedom does not usually differentiate: the right to remain and the standing of a person granted asylum. The decree issued by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) on 28 March 1918 granted the right of asylum to "any foreigner persecuted in his homeland for crimes of a political or religious character." Similar enactments followed across the other Soviet republics, and in 1936, the right of asylum was inscribed in Article 129 of the Soviet Constitution.[5] What none of these instruments addressed was the rather consequential question of what status a foreigner acquired once asylum had been granted in the USSR. This silence mattered: right and status derived from entirely separate sources of power. Asylum was Soviet, constitutional, and the exclusive prerogative of the state. The status of political migrant required, by contrast, the existence of a communist party willing either to direct the individual to the USSR in the first place or, at the very least, to vouch for them. That usually was the communist party of the country the applicant had left. Asylum allowed a person to stay in the country; the recognition provided them with housing, work, treatment, and everything their family needed, and because it came from a party, it also confirmed that they were still one of them. At least until 1943, the status was conferred by assemblies of representatives of the Communist International (Comintern) and its national sections, convened as "legitimation commission." The Soviet state could authorize a person to remain on its soil, but it could not, by any authority it possessed, make that person a political migrant.

There was an element of the chaos of the early Soviet years, with their administrative musical chairs and institutional improvisation. I suggest, however, that we view the Soviet practice of granting asylum as part of a broader process. Political migration was primarily defined by an authority's decision about the migrant's standing. This situation produced an arrangement that I call "*two-key asylum*": one key was Soviet, held by the government in the form of admission and the right to remain, and the other was held abroad, within the applicant's own party and its representation in the Comintern, together

inition. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), Fond 539, Opis 2, delo 55, l. 3.

5 D.A. Gaĭdukov, *Istoriîa Sovetskoĭ Konstitut͡sii: sbornik dokumentov, 1917–1957*. (Moskva: AN SSSR, 1957), 55, 357.

with the International Red Aid's (Mezhdunarodnai͡a organizat͡sii͡a pomoshchi bort͡sam revolit͡sii – MOPR) legitimation commission when two met in the room. Interestingly, the Soviet party officially had a limited influence on its own, at least until the Comintern was dissolved. The arrangement eventually produced what documents called "determination of belonging" (*opredelenie prinadlezhnosti*), a procedure distinct from the refugee-status determination.[6] By belonging (*prinadlezhnost'*) I mean something other than what migration studies usually mean by the term: not a feeling of connection or acceptance, but an administrative finding – whether a person could be assigned to a body competent to answer for him, and whether that body would go on answering for him. State and party divided the decision because the question was twofold, and neither half could answer for the other: the state could say where a person might live, but only a party could say what they were. Neither key was politically neutral, and both could turn together, for instance, when the Comintern found that a certain Estonian political migrant's life was no longer in danger, he lost both his status and his entry visa, as in a case taken up below. The wording first appeared in February 1925 in the Ukrainian statute regulating the political migrants in the Soviet republic,[7] and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet was still using it in 1961. For decades, the operative word in Soviet asylum was not "to define" but "to determine" belonging.

Migration scholarship has rightly dismantled the distinction between "political" and "economic" migration; motives overlap, and the task is to analyze categories rather than reproduce state-issued labels. This is true for the Soviet case as well, although studies of migration to the Soviet Union still tend to draw a firm line between political and economic migrants, an issue that deserves an article of its own. Yet this approach is not entirely sufficient, largely because the Soviet state drew the line first, and scholarship has inherited it. In 1927, for example, the Commission for Political Migrants of the Executive Committee of MOPR, founded under Comintern auspices in 1922, used no fixed classificatory scheme. Its classified minutes record decisions made by applicant by applicant and repeatedly expose overlaps among forms of migration.[8]

I reconstruct the history of *politemigrant* as a Soviet category by paying attention to how these decisions were made, what counted in making them, and who could apply the category and who could withhold it. I use transliteration from Soviet documents and "political migrant" interchangeably, as while

6 Tsentral'nyĭ derzhavnyĭ arkhiv hromads'kykh ob'iednan' ta ukraïniky (TsDAHOU), Fond 1, Opys 24, sprava 5519, ark. 20.

7 TsDAHOU, f. 1, Op. 20, spr. 2026, ark. 33.

8 Gosudarstvennyĭ arkhiv Rossiĭskoĭ Federat͡sii (GARF), Fond 8265, Opis 4, delo 3, ll. 248–249.

the Soviet compound was built on *emigrant*, the word for those who had left, I deem "political migrant" to be more precise. This category, though, never stood alone. Besides, there was *perebezhchik*, or the person who crossed the border into the Soviet Union without clear political sanction; the *reemigrant*, who returned from immigration or exile; the post-WWII *repatriant*; the "person without citizenship" created by the 1938 citizenship law, and, since the 1960s, "the person treated as equivalent to political migrant."[9] I follow how its meaning and operation changed from the Civil War to the early 1960s and ask what this story tells us about 20th century refugee and migration history. I begin with the system of vouching for asylum seekers, a recurrent feature throughout the history of refuge.[10] In the Soviet case, the status was decided by bodies that gathered four to seven Communists of different nationalities in a single room. After some discussion, they reduced the matter to paper: the applicant and his circumstances in one column, the decision in another. The Soviet Union may seem a counterintuitive place from which to study immigration policy, but once political migration is understood as a relation rather than a direction of travel, apparently eccentric cases – Spanish Republican refugees in Latin America, anti-colonial exiles in Cairo and Belgrade – begin to look less anomalous than diagnostic.[11] This claim has its limitations, as it holds only where recognition is tied to a body other than the receiving state.

The distinction appeared in Comintern practice in the 1920s and entered Soviet regulation in 1961. On 15 December 1927, the MOPR's Commission for

9 Each of these categories has its own literatures, though they almost never read together. On repertoires of Soviet citizenship see: Golfo Alexopoulos, "Soviet Citizenship, More or Less: Rights, Emotions, and States of Civic Belonging." *Kritika* 7, no. 3 (2006): 487–528. On post-WWII *repatrianty* see: Seth Bernstein, *Return to the Motherland: Displaced Soviets in WWII and the Cold War*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023). "Persons without citizenship" in the Soviet legal system resolves the standing of *politemigranty* entirely into citizenship categories, see: L.N. Galenskaĭa, *Pravo ubezhishcha: mezhdunarodno-pravovye voprosy*. (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniĭa, 1968); and L.N. Galenskaĭa, *Pravovoe polozhenie inostrant͡sev v SSSR*. (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniĭa, 1982).

10 For instance, the histories of Huguenot refugees in 17–18 centuries Europe and the systems of proving one's belonging to the church and attestations from the previous. congregations: Andrew Spicer, Andrew, "The Consistory Records of Reformed Congregations and the Exile Churches." *The Huguenot Society Journal* 28.5 (2007): 648–649.

11 See: Mario Sznajder, and Luis Roniger, "Political Exile in Latin America." *Latin American Perspectives* 34, no. 4 (2007): 7–30; Eric Burton, "Decolonization, the Cold War, and Africans' Routes to Higher Education Overseas, 1957–1965." *Journal of Global History* 15, no. 1 (2020): 169–191; Sunnie Rucker-Chang, "'Black' Student Migration and The Non-Aligned Movement in Yugoslav Space," *Slavic and East European Journal* 64, no. 3 (2020): 352–373.

Political Migrants of the Executive Committee considered nineteen individual petitions: some applicants received provisional permission to enter the Soviet Union; others awaited further information about the person concerned; besides, nine summaries appeared with the terse formula "recognize the right of asylum."[12] Thirty-four years later, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet approved the "Regulation on Political Migrants in the USSR." On 8 June 1961, the Executive Committee of the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR approved an instruction entitled "On the Procedure for the Individual Determination of Affiliation with Political Emigration of Persons Granted the Right of Asylum in the Soviet Union."[13] The right of asylum was the premise; belonging was determined afterwards. I trace the decades between those documents and their effects.

Conceptual history, as Reinhart Koselleck practiced it, presupposes struggles over terminology before a public.[14] In the Soviet public arena, the same words were used to define something else, as during the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern, which urged its members to campaign for the "right of asylum for political migrants" in "bourgeois states."[15] Almost every document that defined or revised the category of *politemigrant* was classified. A German diplomat offered a contemporary gloss when he explained the brevity of the 1938 Soviet citizenship law: individual cases were governed by instructions that were "kept in the strictest secrecy."[16] A concept whose operative meaning was never meant to be public might be expected to stay put. Yet, classification itself drove change as officials repeatedly applied the category to cases it did not fit. *Politemigrant* faced backward to persecution and forward to eventual return, with cancellation built into the status.[17] It also operated unevenly across the Soviet Union, as Moscow overturned decisions already made by republican commissions.[18]

12 GARF, F. 8265, Op. 4, d. 3, ll. 250–251.

13 TsDAHOU, F. 1, Op. 24, spr. 5519, ark. 20.

14 See: Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 75–92. Also see David Brandenberger, "Global and Transnational in Form, Soviet in Content: The Changing Semantics of Internationalism in Official Soviet Discourse, 1917–1991." *The Russian Review* 80, no. 4 (2021): 562–580, which follows a Soviet concept through the public register; *politemigrant* has almost no such register to follow.

15 Béla Kun, *Kommunisticheskiĭ Internat͡sional v dokumentakh: reshenii͡a, tezisy i vozzvanii͡a kongressov Kominterna i plenumov IKKI, 1919–1932*. (Moscow: Partiĭnoe izd-vo 1933), 872–873.

16 PA AA, RAV 180-1/407, 30. Januar 1939.

17 TsDAHOU, F. 1, Op. 24, Spr. 5519, ark. 20.

18 GARF, F. 8265, Op. 4, d. 3, l. 260.

My approach also draws on Quentin Skinner's insistence that we must grasp "not merely what people are saying but also what they are doing in saying it."[19] I read Vladimir Semenov's rejection, in April 1958, to discuss the German political migrants in the USSR and their possible repatriation primarily as evidence of language: of the vocabulary through which the category was articulated. Nor do I deny that "political migrant" was an administrative label. Following Roger Zetter, I argue that the category helped form the people to whom it was applied and frame the lives they were permitted to lead.[20] Once *politemigrant* had taken root as an administrative concept, for example, the Soviet authorities found it necessary to invent the category of the "person accorded equivalent status to a political migrant." By the 1960s, the latter had come to outnumber the former. Thus, it is imperative to pay close attention to the category's various administrative shades: the word circulated in public while its operative meaning was fixed behind closed doors.

Canonical refugee history is a Geneva story, from the Nansen passport of 1922 to the Refugee Convention of 1951.[21] In that account, the socialist world produces refugees but rarely receives them. Yet, in November 1955, the Soviet Red Cross reported to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that more than 30,000 political migrants were living in the USSR, only to concede, several lines later, that no one had actually counted them.[22]

A recent collective volume does not address Soviet cases of migration beyond wartime displacement from the USSR and postwar repatriation to the USSR. An unmarked boundary separates these experiences from the history of

19 Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics. Volume 1, Regarding Method*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 82.

20 Roger Zetter, "Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 4, no. 1 (1991): 39–62; Roger Zetter, "More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 2 (2007): 172–192. For the label taken up as self-description see a memoir by a Bulgarian who left after the coup of June 1923 and who uses the term throughout for himself and his cohort: Ivan Krekmanov, *Zapiski na politemigranta*. (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Bŭlgarskata komunisticheska partiĭa, 1962).

21 See: Michael Robert Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Claudena M. Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: The Emergence of a Regime*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). For the contemporary legal statement of that story see: Louise W. Holborn, "The Legal Status of Political Refugees, 1920–1938," *The American Journal of International Law* 32 no. 4 (1938): 680–703.

22 Rossiĭskiĭ gosudarstvennyĭ arkhiv noveĭsheĭ istorii (RGANI), Fond 5, Opis 38, Delo 379, ll., 215–217.

refuge, and the boundary is archival.[23] Yet the volume's own governing concept invites us to cross it: refugeedom "does not depend solely on those sites that came under the spotlight of international or state-led refugee regimes."[24] The Soviet case supplied more than a national artifact; it supplied a vocabulary. In postwar Czechoslovakia, refugees from the Greek Civil War and Yugoslavs who arrived after the Tito-Stalin split were classified as "politická emigrace," a status that until 1960 conferred asylum with no formal legal basis, resting instead on an arrangement modeled on the Soviet Constitution of 1936 and administered, in Nikola Tohma's words, "analogous to Soviet practice."[25] There, too, status was determined jointly by the international department of the host country's ruling party and the migrant's own party leadership. The Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies stood outside the 1951 Refugee Convention, yet they developed alternative asylum arrangements through a shared administrative vocabulary.

Scholarship illuminates different parts of this system. Brigitte Studer examines Comintern vetting of cadres, so the people the apparatus wanted.[26] I examine the inverse relation: people seeking recognition from the apparatus. William Chase, Alexander Vatlin, Barry McLoughlin, Wilhelm Mensing, and

23 Sabine Dullin, *La frontière épaisse: aux origines des politiques soviétiques, 1920–1940*. (Paris: École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2014), 193–194. Dullin states that the theme of refuge and asylum in the Soviet history is "largely unexplored."

24 Peter Gatrell, Katarzyna Nowak, Lauren Banko, and Anindita Ghoshal, *Refugee Voices in Modern Global History: Reckoning with Refugeedom*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4. The pattern is not confined to that volume: Antonio Ferrara notes that the foundational works "do not cover events taking place within the Soviet Union – an unfortunate pattern repeated in most of the later historiography." Antonio Ferrara, "Eugene Kulischer, Joseph Schechtman and the Historiography of European Forced Migration," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46, no. 4 (2011): 734.

25 Nikola Tohma, "Statelessness and Social Citizenship of Greek Civil War Refugees in Post-1948 Communist Czechoslovakia." In Rachel Chin and Samuel Clowes Huneke, eds., *Reimagining Citizenship in Postwar Europe*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2025), 128–129. She also reads asylum in state socialism as a status following political rather than legal criteria, see: Nikola Tohma, "The Construction of a Political Refugee: Foreign Comrades in 1950s Socialist Czechoslovakia," In *Refugees and Citizens in Twentieth-Century East Central Europe: An Unlikely Refuge?* Michal Frankl, ed., (Vienna: Central European University Press, 2026), 119–152.

26 Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 73–89. The closest work to this one is Miroslav Schneider, "Die tschechoslowakische Auswanderung in die Sowjetunion in der Zwischenkriegszeit (1921–1939)" (PhD diss., Universität Regensburg, 2007), which reconstructs MOPR's legitimation procedure for the Czechoslovak case from the same fonds. Schneider reads the constitutional right as reduced by the 1930s to "a formality" (188); I argue it had never been the instrument that conferred the status.

others trace the repression of foreign communists through party structures;[27] I follow the humanitarian channel beside them. Lisa Kirschenbaum shows solidarity and suspicion shaping the lives of Spanish refugees.[28] Ukrainian records from the 1940s and 1950s reveal a further shift: officials withheld the category from people whose lives most clearly appeared to fit it. My argument rests on a succession of once-classified documents from Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, and Germany, largely unnoticed through the three and a half decades of Soviet archival declassification, as were the records in which the status of *politemigrant* was contested and constructed. Together, these materials allow the category's changing shape to come into view. *Politemigrant* began as a form of belonging – belonging to a party able to answer for a person – although the criteria stated on paper never quite coincided with the practice. During the 1930s, recognition hardened into a revocable obligation. After the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, the category shifted from individual applicants to whole populations defined by nationality, and threw off an administrative invention: the person "accorded equivalent standing" to a *politemigrant*. The classified regulation adopted in 1961 ends the story, settling a much older arrangement, in which authority over political migration had never rested with a single institution.

2 "Not Yet Sufficiently Polished": Making a Category

In the beginning was the word, and the word had to be turned on its head. In Soviet usage, *emigrant* meant a Russian who had left; and after 1921, when the White emigration – *beloemigranty*, a noun that already presupposed departure – was denationalized in a single stroke, it came to mean almost exclusively those who had left for good.[29] The Bolsheviks needed a name for a different

27 See: William J. Chase, *Enemies within the Gates? The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934–1939*. (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2001); Barry McLoughlin, *Left to the Wolves: Irish Victims of Stalinist Terror*. (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2007); A. Iu. Vatlin, *"Nu i nechist'": nemet͡skai͡a operat͡sii͡a NKVD v Moskve i Moskovskoĭ oblasti 1936–1941 gg*. (Moscow: ROSSPÈN, 2012).

28 Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

29 Decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) and the Council of People's Commissars (SNK), "On depriving certain categories of persons residing abroad of the rights of citizenship", 15 December 1921, in *Sobranie uzakonenii i rasporiazhenii rabochego i krest'ianskogo pravitel'stva za 1921 g*. (Moscow: B.i., 1944), s. 950. Eric Lohr, *Russian Citizenship: From Empire to Soviet Union*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 149.

kind of migrant: a foreigner sympathetic to their cause, fleeing persecution of his own, and arriving in the Soviet Union because of it. They changed the noun's meaning by adding a prefix. *Emigrant* pointed away from the Soviet state. *Politemigrant* pointed toward it.

The first text to define *politemigrant* defined it twice, and the doubling is the whole story in miniature. The November 1922 statute of the Society for Mutual Aid to Political Migrants specifies that political migrants are persons holding the appropriate certificates from the organs of the Comintern or the People's Commissariat of Nationalities. The next line added a second path: "The Council of the Society may, where necessary, recognize as political migrants' persons who, for whatever reason, cannot obtain such a certificate from Narkomnats or the Comintern."[30] A single sentence opened documentary and discretionary paths that were never separated again. An earlier draft in the same file, for an "International Political Red Cross" (MOPR's predecessor), cast the net wider still, promising help "to communists, and also to members of other parties (syndicalists, anarchists) and to the non-party, who have set out on the path of struggle against the capitalist order," creating a definition with no outer edge at all.[31] Yet the same file also holds the Comintern Secretariat's "Guidelines for the Settlement of Questions Concerning Refugees" from 15 November 1922, where the edge is absolute in a different dimension: a refugee could leave his country only by decision of his party's central committee, and an undocumented one went unrecognized "until identified and endorsed by the Party."[32] So the category was, from its first year, as open as it could be about what a person believed and as closed as it could be about who had sent them. Both texts were produced in the same month, coinciding with the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern, which had issues of MOPR on its agenda, as well as Lenin's report titled "Five Years of the Russian Revolution and the Prospects of the World Revolution."[33] At that moment, the Soviet Union was still developing its migration regime to sort arrivals at the border, and it was necessary to show deference to foreign central committees, which still had a chance of assuming power.

In 1924, instructions supplied an outer threshold: "serious danger to the persecuted (not less than 3 years' hard labor, 4 years' imprisonment)." They also excluded "defectors of any kind" and economic migrants from MOPR assis-

30 RGASPI, F. 539, Op. 2, d. 55, l. 3.
31 Ibid., 17, 19, 22, 25.
32 Ibid., 7–9.
33 Kun, *Kommunisticheskiĭ Internat͡sional*, 293.

tance.[34] That year, the Central Committee for Political Migrant Affairs conceded that the qualification was "not yet sufficiently polished."[35] It would take thirty-seven years to codify it.

This qualification worked most visibly at the Soviet periphery, where migration collided directly with the border regime. In February 1925, a statute was drafted for an All-Ukrainian Committee for Political Migrants' Affairs, attached to the Ukrainian Central Committee of MOPR.[36] The republican committee's task was to receive, house, feed, employ, educate, and register. Standing remained Moscow's concern: Article 4 assigns "the determination of the quality of a political migrant" to the Central Committee for Political Migrant Affairs at the Executive Committee of MOPR; the word "quality" is struck through, with "belonging" written above it.[37] Legitimation in Moscow ran through three administrative bodies: the MOPR's Central Committee, the OGPU, and the relevant Comintern section. This division was justified by the discovery that men legitimized locally had turned out to be spies; no security organ sat on the local committees.[38] A work plan drawn up in Kharkiv that same year states the same arrangement more bluntly: the committee will handle legitimation of border-country migrants through the party's nationalities department, but "the final legitimation of political migrants will depend on the Central Committee for Political Migrant Affairs."[39]

Prinadlezhnost' (belonging) is the key word of Article 4 of the decree that finally fixed the category in writing, and of the Red Cross instruction of the same year on determining affiliation with the political emigration. It resurfaces in the mid-1950s in the title of a CPSU International Department file on "establishing the belonging of individual persons" to the Soviet and foreign parties, and it was still the working term in a Latvian republican Red Cross file in the 1960s.[40] For decades, the substance of Soviet asylum practice lay not in definition but in the determination of belonging. Refusals show how little the written threshold governed. August Lacis was denied status in 1925 because he "was not forced to leave the country;" Kliment Krachkovskii was refused in 1926 because the commission judged his motive to be economic.[41] No refusal in the 1925–

34 RGASPI, F. 539, Op. 2, d. 80, ll. 15, 21.
35 Ibid., 9.
36 TsDAHOU, F. 1, Op. 20, spr. 2026, ark. 33–35.
37 Ibid., 33.
38 Ibid., 34.
39 Ibid., 31.
40 RGANI, F. 5, Op. 28, d. 380; Latvijas Valsts arhīvs (LVA), F. 1416, apr, 8-p, l. 2, p. 9.
41 GARF, F. 8265, O. 4, d. 3, l. 6, 154.

1927 file turned on the length of imprisonment. Other applicants from Latvia were refused and referred to the OGPU because, after arrest at home, they had "without being subjected to any torture … named every comrade they knew."[42] Persecution and party membership were present; an uncodified moral judgment defeated the claim.

During two sittings in December 1927, the commission fixed the division between the two factors on paper, using different formulas on the same page. On the afternoon of 7 December, it met under the chairmanship of the Bulgarian communist Naim Isakov (Velev), with representatives of the Hungarian, Polish, Latvian, and Bulgarian Comintern sections, the head of the Department of Political Emigration, and the secretary of the MOPR Central Committee. The classified protocol is organized into two columns: the applicant and their circumstances on the left, the decision on the right. The left-hand entries are almost identical in form, and the right-hand ones are not. Valdis Trankel, a Latvian hairdresser, crossed the border six days earlier with a Communist Party of Latvia card in hand: recognized as a political migrant. Adam Kozlovskii, a Latvian electrician, Latvian Komsomol since 1923: recognized as a political migrant. Leonid Ginsburg, a Jewish market gardener from Poland, Polish party since 1921: granted the right of asylum and rendered assistance. Pavel Lichko, a Ukrainian clerk, arrived from Warsaw a week before, Polish party since 1921: granted the right of asylum and rendered assistance. Three Poles and a Belarusian followed, all recognized; Anton Panasiuk, a Belarusian peasant, was refused outright pending word from his national section; the Toshev siblings, twenty and seventeen, Bulgarian Komsomol cards: granted the right of asylum. Meer Shvets, a shoemaker from Volhynia, then in Poland, with a Western Ukrainian Komsomol card: granted the right of asylum. Five grants of asylum and seven recognitions on one page, and not one word of explanation in either column.[43]

The commission used at least eight outcomes: recognition; asylum with assistance; refusal pending inquiry; referral; postponement; recognition as a family member; reclassification as a re-emigrant; and transfer to the OGPU.[44] The lesser of these outcomes shared a feature absent from the written rules that becomes visible when taking a closer look at the personal cases. Veljko Ribar was a Serbian with a Communist Party of Austria party card; Georgii Balog, a Hungarian from Transylvania, with a Greek party card; Aleksei Bulygin, a Croat

42 Ibid., 156–159.
43 Ibid., 247–249.
44 Ibid.

with a Yugoslav card.[45] But in cases of fully recognized political migrants, all of them held a card from their own country's party. The attendance list explains the pattern. Representatives of eight national sections attended on 15 December, alongside Comintern and MOPR officials. No Austrian representative was present when Ribar, a Serb with an Austrian card, appeared; no Hungarian could speak for Balog. The absence of an OGPU representative does not remove the security organ from the system; the 1925 Moscow letter made it one of three sources of legitimation, but the people deciding these cases were party representatives.[46] The alternation of wordings tracked who could vouch, not how deserving a case looked. Recognition required a party cell both able and willing to speak for the applicant. Where none could, because the party in the room was not their own, because they held only a national Komsomol card, because they held dual citizenship, or because an inquiry had gone out and not yet come back; the commission granted the one thing the Soviet state could give on its own authority: the right of asylum.

It is conceivable that if the legitimation commission had actively exercised its discretionary powers, the "lesser formula" would have been applied indiscriminately and, perhaps, in a more chaotic manner. However, in the two meetings of December 1927, where the decisions can be cross-referenced with the composition of the commission, this formula was applied to a person who had no one to vouch for him among those present;[47] in turn, every person who was granted the status of a political migrant was able to produce a Communist Party membership card from his own country. Hence, Zigmas Angarietis, the Lithuanian representative at the commission's sitting of 11 January 1928, complained of "alien political migrants" sent by the *Rote Hilfe Deutschlands* "without the permission of the Executive Committee of MOPR."[48] *Alien* meant *unvouched*

45 Ibid., 252. Proof of membership in a "brotherly" party was an obvious requirement for anyone seeking asylum. Problems arose when a migrant had left the party card behind on purpose during the escape. Such an applicant was at the mercy of their national group's representatives at the Comintern, and of anyone else who could vouch for them. Vouching came in two forms, party and personal. Either the applicant's party confirmed that it knew of the escape and had directed it, or someone inside the Soviet apparatus put their name and influence behind the applicant. Personal vouching was rare, but in the late 1930s Elena Stasova more than once asked for a case to be reopened or vouched for an applicant she knew personally.

46 Ibid., 244, 249, 252. Schneider describes the guidelines as treating transfer to the USSR as no more than a reassignment from one national section to another (*lediglich eine Versetzung aus einer nationalen Sektion in eine andere*): "Die tschechoslowakische Auswanderung," 186, citing RGASPI, f. 539, op. 1, d. 57, l. 6.

47 Ibid., 247–253.

48 Ibid., d. 11, l. 90.

for, the same logic by which the commission could rule, that same year, that entry to the Soviet Union was permissible only where the USSR was an applicant's last refuge, and then reverse itself three weeks later, the moment a party representative intervened.[49]

3 "Im eigentlichen Sinne des Wortes": The Criterion That Did Not Work

In 1927 the Executive Committee of MOPR debated the "question of political emigration." Memos were circulated among various members of the administrative bodies addressing the criteria, aid, and patterns of movement, but the opening question in papers written in several languages was the same: "Who should be considered a political migrant?"[50] The answer opens with three kinds of impostors: spies, adventurers chasing material gain under the cover of the status, and revolutionaries "who had the possibility of remaining in their own country and for whom emigration was not a necessity." Yet the document gave up on creating a firm rule, stating that "one cannot be guided by a strictly established scheme … rather, one must examine each case attentively, always bearing in mind the great and evident danger that does not permit the comrade to remain any longer in his own country."[51] So not only could claimants to asylum manipulate Soviet statuses, as in Sheila Fitzpatrick's "world of impostors," but also officials themselves who could not make those statuses hold still.[52]

In place of clear criteria, the draft offers a ranking of potential claimants to political asylum: communists and members of the Communist youth leagues first, along with "fellow travelers" (sympathizers to the Bolshevik cause); then members of the "national-revolutionary movements", then trade unionists and cooperative activists; and, last, members of other "opposition parties."[53] The list reads as a hierarchy of merit, but it measures two things the apparatus never separated: how exposed a person was at home, and how useful they were to

49 Ibid., 59, 54. The rule was not an improvisation of 1928, as the German section of MOPR (RHD) conference in Berlin of May 1925 had already designated the USSR a country of the "last refuge." Schneider, "Die tschechoslowakische Auswanderung," 185–186, citing RGASPI, f. 539, op. 1, d. 57, l. 34.

50 RGASPI, F. 529, Op. 2, d. 242, l. 81.

51 Ibid., 82,.

52 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 270–272.

53 RGASPI, F. 529, Op. 2, d. 242, l. 81.

the movement that would have vouched for them. Set against the December 1927 sittings, it is instead a ranking by who could be spoken for. The document says as much further on, where the decision passes to the local MOPR section, which "must coordinate its decision with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the migrant's country, given that the party is best acquainted with the political and economic situation in the country, with the position of the given migrant, and with his value to the country's revolutionary movement at the present moment."[54] But only the party could judge a person's value to it; the state could only take the party's word.

The draft also conceded that economic deprivation could constitute political persecution: where revolutionaries were denied work, "such migrants should be counted among political migrants."[55] A memo signed by D. Rubinstein put it more sharply: workers dismissed for revolutionary activity were not political migrants "in the direct sense of the word" if they formally left for economic reasons, yet the categories were "inseparably linked."[56] The administration answered the irresolvable distinction by restating it: a German section of the Comintern memorandum of 1 February 1927 still divided emigration into economic and political categories.[57] These were drafts and internal memos, and how their criteria were meant to work is not obvious. The Legitimation Commission's protocols record 2,576 items between 1925 and 1929, of which 2,168 are decisions on status. The severity threshold – three years' hard labor, four years' imprisonment, or, in 1929, "long-term imprisonment or the death sentence" – appeared in fewer than one decision in forty (Table 1). Party membership appeared in two of five decisions, and prior party permission in almost one in five (Table 2). This criterion, as debated within MOPR, rarely matched that used to make decisions. In a system with two levels of authority, it could hardly have been otherwise: the criterion was the part of the decision meant to be written down, while the judgement itself sat in another country.

Two further trends run through these decisions. The refusal rate rose from 29.7% in 1925–1927 to 49% in 1928 and 52.1% in 1929, which places the category's practical narrowing several years before the First World Congress of MOPR in 1932.[58] In the same years, deferrals tripled while cases waited for clar-

54 Ibid., 84–85.
55 Ibid., 83.
56 Ibid., 28.
57 Ibid., 22.
58 GARF, F. 8265, Op. 3, d. 3, ll. 61–62. Schneider, "Die tschechoslowakische Auswanderung," 187, estimates from the same files that at least a third of applicants were refused. On the

TABLE 1 Decisions of the Commission for Political Migrant Affairs, 1925–1929[a]

Decision recorded	1925–1927	1928	1929	Total
Recognized as a *politemigrant*	835	234	158	1,227
Not recognized	352	225	172	749
Deferred for further information	55	73	44	172
Recognized as a family member	12	0	0	12
Reclassified as a re-emigrant	1	0	0	1
Transferred to the GPU/NKVD	5	2	0	7
Status decisions	**1,260**	**534**	**374**	**2,168**
Non-status items	124	88	155	367
Blank or administrative	28	0	13	41
Items	**1,412**	**622**	**542**	**2,576**
Refusals, %	29.7	49.0	52.1	37.9
Deferrals, %	4.4	13.7	11.8	7.9

a Based on data gathered from GARF, F. 8265, Op 4, d. 3, 11, 16. Table 1 shows every item entered in the protocols, including referrals, administrative and blank entries, and the subset of 2,168 status decisions in which the commission recognized, refused, deferred, or reclassified a case. Table 2 is based on calculations of status decisions in which at least one ground was recorded; because a case could carry more than one ground, the columns do not sum to 100%. Decisions with no ground whatsoever are excluded from the calculations, though they remain in Table 1. It must also be noted that the fall in the recorded persecution after 1927 reflects a change in what was written down, as much as a change in what the commissions were weighing when making decisions.

ification. The records also lost their narrative detail: about 25% of the 1925–1927 entries recount persecution, and in 1928–1929, almost none of the entries instead contain biographical information, such as birth year, nationality, trade, date of border crossing, and party membership, replacing accounts of arrests and sentences at home. This shift coincided with the Soviet Union's gradual transition to a strategy of "socialism in one country," rather than universal support for the world revolution.

broader closure of Soviet migration in these years see: Valentina M. Moiseenko, "Ėmigra͡t͡siĭa i immigra͡t͡siĭa v RSFSR (SSSR) v 1920-e gg.," *Migra͡t͡siĭa i so͡t͡sial'no-ėkonomicheskoe razvitie* 1, no. 1 (2016): 63–78.

TABLE 2 Grounds recorded in the decision[a]

Ground cited	1925–1927 (%)	1928 (%)	1929 (%)	Overall (%)
party membership	46.1	31.7	33.0	39.9
party's permission	22.2	11.3	14.8	18.0
persecution	26.6	0.3	0.2	14.7
education	4.1	2.6	3.1	3.5
economic motive	1.6	0.5	2.2	1.5
imprisonment	1.7	0.6	1.5	1.4
citizenship	0.7	1.3	1.5	1.0
provocateur	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.9
amnesty	0.7	0.5	0.9	0.7
death sentence	0.6	0.3	0.9	0.6
hard labor (*katorga*)	0.8	0.0	0.2	0.5
length of prior residence	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.2
defector (*perebezhchik*)	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.1
"last refuge"	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

a Ibid.

By the summer of 1935, the argument over who counted had spilled into speech. The stenographic record of the Commission on Political Emigration's sitting of 26 August, at the Second Enlarged Plenum of MOPR's Executive Committee, records the organization disputing the meaning of its own central term. Of Italians amnestied and settled in France, one speaker remarked that "this is not political emigration in the true sense of the word." Of applicants in general, after the assassination of the head of the Leningrad party committee, Sergei Kirov, Elena Stasova, the head of MOPR, stated the position more bluntly than the written instructions: the USSR "agrees to admit political migrants, but under the pretext of political emigration we cannot let terrorists into the country."[59] When Palmiro Togliatti, head of the Italian Communist Party, objected to Stasova that "economic migrants who turn into political migrants are political migrants,"[60] she did not disagree, but said that the legitimation commission reviewed six to eight such reclassification cases every ten days.[61] And when the discussion reached the deserters of the Chaco War between Paraguay and

59 RGASPI, F. 529, Op. 2, d. 33, l. 9.
60 Ibid., 38.
61 Ibid., 39.

Bolivia, which had ended two months earlier, more than four hundred of whom had been killed by the Argentine government, the meeting resolved that they are owed no assistance, "because we, as Red Aid, do not consider them political migrants."[62] Mass death did not make them political migrants, because the category had never been about danger.

4 "Conduct Unworthy of a Political Migrant": Status as Obligation

On 19 December 1929, the Legitimation Commission of MOPR's Executive Committee removed Bulgarian communist Mincho Zhelev Kolev, then living in Rostov, from the register of political migrants for "conduct unworthy of a political migrant."[63] The initiative had come a month earlier from a group of Kolev's fellow Bulgarian political migrants. Before the year was out, the same rationale was used against two more men, one in the UzSSR's Andijan and another in Novosibirsk. Two further removals appeared under different headings. The Polish *politemigrant* Levitan was struck from the register as the "organizer of an artisanal cooperative, not in need of material means," and the German *politemigrant* Markgraf lost his status because he had been amnestied at home.[64] Three ways of losing status, yet only one concerns events in the country of persecution. In the other two, the danger remained where it had always been. The judgment passed on the man charged, by the institution in most cases, and, in Kolev's case, first by his own community. Political migrant was a status held on continuing approval, and lost as readily as it had been acquired once the vouchsafe was withdrawn. The phrase "conduct unworthy of a political migrant" marked precisely such a withdrawal by one's comrades or national section, and the procedure endured. There were no guidelines that would set out what conduct was owed, but the revocations of the status named the obligations by implication: to keep the confidence of the section that had vouched for you, to stay out of the quarrels, and not to alter the social position on which recognition rested. So, Levitan lost his standing for prospering, because belonging obliged, and the obligation was assessed as conduct, by the same people who had spoken for the man at the start. When the Soviet Red Cross reviewed the files of those on

62 Ibid.

63 GARF, F. 8265, Op. 4, d. 16, l. 4 (revers). On the Bulgarian political migration in Soviet Ukraine in these years see: M.D. Dykhan, *Bolhary-politemihranty u sotsialistychnomu budivnytstvi na Ukraïni v 1924–1929 rr.* (Kyiv: Vyd-vo Kyïvs'koho un-tu, 1973).

64 GARF, F. 8265, Op. 4, d. 16, ll. 29 (ob.), 38.

its register in 1961, its instructions still contemplated their "loss of this quality" – the withdrawal of status because of conduct or a change in social position.[65]

Comintern documents formalized this conditionality. In 1933, a commission of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) proposed three groups: recognized political migrants with ordinary residence permits; people who had fled persecution but needed confirmation from their national party or the ECCI; and those active in clandestine, military, or otherwise, who had to take Soviet citizenship.[66] The first group's permit bore the designation *"politemigrant."*[67] Its short validity meant that every renewal reopened the question of recognition. By 1933, this status no longer simply attested to the migrant's ideological commitment. Recognition had to be renewed on a Soviet permit, and the migrant's dependence shifted from the party that had vouched for him to the office that stamped it. By 1936, this conditionality had become lethal. Political migrants were caught in the mass repression of foreign communists, especially during the Great Terror of 1937–1938. Personal cases show what the relation between status and authority came to mean.

Pavel Kolin, an Estonian citizen, spent 1929–1936 in prison for intelligence work undertaken on behalf of the Soviet Union. After his release from an Estonian prison, Semen Uritskii, the head of Soviet military intelligence, vouched for him as "a sincere and honest collaborator."[68] The Comintern nevertheless decided that his life was no longer in danger, denied him the status of *politemigrant*, and refused him an entry visa to the USSR. Unemployed and out of options, he crossed the Soviet border illegally in March 1937 and was arrested. On 4 April, Elena Stasova appealed to Iakov Agranov, first deputy of NKVD, for a man whose service Soviet intelligence had itself certified. Kolin had worked for a state that not only denied him admission but also imprisoned him for entering without the standing it had denied him in the first place.[69]

Karl Bühren had neither Kolin's patronage nor his claim to recognition. Organizer of the 1925 International Workers' Olympiad, stripped of German

65 TsDAHOU, F. 1, Op. 24, spr. 5519, ark. 20.

66 RGASPI, F. 495, Op. 4, d. 231, l. 50. Citizenship and status were separate matters. Recognition as a *politemigrant* did not require Soviet citizenship: the 1933 scheme demanded it only of those in clandestine or military work. Citizenship did not bring recognition either. Bühren's citizenship application was refused in the same months that MOPR declined to register him. By 1963, two-thirds of the people on the Kyiv oblast register held no citizenship at all.

67 PA AA, RAV 180-1/406, Deutsche Botschaft Moskau, 17 Juli 1939.

68 GARF, F. 8265, Op. 4, d. 57, l. 85.

69 Ibid., 78.

citizenship in 1934 as a member of an anti-Nazi resistance, he reached Moscow through the Comintern-adjacent Red Sport International but was never recognized as *politemigrant*. In April 1937, the USSR refused his citizenship application and ordered him and his passportless wife to leave. Britain and Sweden turned them back, and they then spent six weeks under guard on ships in Leningrad harbor, paying for their upkeep. MOPR twice declined to intervene because Bühren was not registered as a political migrant. In July, his case was passed to the NKVD.[70] After eleven stateless months, he was executed at the Butovo firing range on 4 July 1938, one week after his son.

For others, the institutions that had vouched for political migrants supplied the language and names used to destroy them. Elsa Upis, a Lithuanian who reached the USSR in 1936 after nine years in prison, appeared in a covering note of 23 May 1937 as a "former MOPR employee" and was arrested as a Trotskyist.[71] A Party Control Commission rebuttal in defense of the editor Zaretsky cited Stalin's March 1937 speech to the plenum on the elimination of double agents and named the German communist Max Richter an enemy of the people.[72] In March 1938, Eugen Varga, a prominent Hungarian communist and once a member of the ECCI, told Stalin that the mass arrest of political migrants had left foreigners in Moscow "half mad and incapable of working as a result of constant fear."[73] Though, he prefaced the complaint by conceding that it was better to arrest two innocents than let one spy go free. Foreign parties were still asking about missing members decades later. In April 1955, Todor Zhivkov, general secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party, asked the Soviet Central Committee to trace eleven former Bulgarian political migrants; an internal check found that nine had been arrested in 1937–1938, of them five shot and four sent to the Gulag.[74] The Terror consumed tens of thousands of people to whom the Soviet state had granted asylum, but the category of *politemigrant* survived the destruction of its bearers. It completed the logic formed in the 1920s: a party's word conferred the status, its withdrawal cancelled it. A MOPR dossier could be the only proof that a political migrant existed. Categories that began as a signifier of Soviet support for revolutionary movements abroad became, amid the palpable xenophobia of the late 1930s, instruments for deciding survival on grounds no instruction had fixed.

70 Ibid., 228–236.

71 Ibid., 118–119, 128–139.

72 Ibid., 114–115; d. 57, ll. 18–20.

73 Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew. 1996. *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*. (New York: Macmillan Press, 1996), 245–246.

74 RGANI, F. 5, Op. 28, d. 379, ll. 47–50.

5 "By Some Accounts a Political Migrant": From Person to Nation and the Commission That Determined Belonging

The Comintern ceased to exist in 1943. MOPR, sustained largely by inertia, survived for another five years, until 1948. The institutions through which foreign communist parties had vouched for prospective asylum seekers disappeared, but the practice of vouching survived in another form: the work formerly conducted through the Comintern passed to the International Department of the Central Committee (CC) of the VKP(b) (the CPSU after 1952) and to the Soviet Red Cross.[75] Their archives preserve a steady flow of appeals from foreign parties on behalf of their political migrants. The Central Committee of the Tudeh Party of Iran sent many requests to the CC CPSU, whether to help an Iranian political migrant buy clothing, to find permanent employment for one of its own Central Committee members, or to admit a man to a Moscow medical institute without entrance examinations. The Politburo of the Communist Party of Greece named the political migrants living in Uzbekistan who were to attend the party school in Bucharest.[76] By then, only a *politmigrant's* own party could intercede on their behalf.

The vocabulary of decision, however, had changed. In November 1955, two Egyptian citizens in Belgrade who feared arrest at home applied for Soviet visas "for permanent residence as political migrants." The International Department replied that their arrival was "inexpedient," neither disputing the category nor explaining the refusal further.[77] "Inexpediency" (*netselesoobraznost'*) also disposed of a request from Mustafa Barzani, leader of Kurdish migrants who fled Iraq, to move them from Uzbekistan closer to Moscow.[78] When Barzani, in June 1955, sought to join the CPSU under the name A.A. Mamedov, the Soviet state replied with an internal rule stating that "only citizens of the USSR are admitted to the party."[79] Status now increasingly rested on ineffable judgments of expediency.

75 See for instance: RGANI, F. 5, Op. 28, d. 379. The dissolution is visible in MOPR's economic files: in April 1946 its Central Committee declined to renew the lease on the house at Obukha Street in Moscow, rented "for the needs of political migrants" the building having passed to the Administration of Affairs of the CC VKP(b) under an SNK order of 2 April 1944. GARF, F. 8265, Op. 1, d. 511, ll. 1–2; on the transfer of MOPR's Tashkent children's home to the Uzbek Ministry of Education in August 1947 see Ibid., d. 929.

76 RGANI, F. 5, Op. 28, d. 347, ll. 8–10, 25, 27, 34, 62, 122, 123, 133–134, 136, 139–140, 160.

77 Ibid., d. 348, ll. 196–197.

78 Ibid., 82–86, 176–181.

79 Ibid., 105–107.

On 22 August 1958, the chairman of the KGB of Ukraine, Vitalii Nikitchenko, signed a statistical statement about the republic's political migrants. It counted 203 political migrants, including 150 Spaniards, 15 Iranians, 10 Yugoslavs, and 7 Greeks.[80] Another 129 persons appeared separately, under a heading of their own: "Spaniards brought to us in childhood."[81] The children brought over to the Soviet Union during the Spanish Civil War and the naturalized veterans of the Blue Division appeared instead as "Spaniards," or as "persons without citizenship." Francisco Gaspar-Torrus, sent for aviation training in 1938, became a decorated Soviet military pilot, returned to Spain in 1957, was recruited there by Spanish intelligence, and came back of his own accord in June 1959 to make a statement at the Chop border crossing. His file called him a *re-emigrant*, never a *politemigrant*.[82]

Welfare records show the administrative form that the category has taken by the 1960s. Classified Red Cross reports from Kyiv Oblast grouped "political migrants and persons deemed equivalent to them,"[83] and in 1963, the latter outnumbered the former.[84] Those deemed equivalent were overwhelmingly wives, children, and dependent parents of the recognized migrants. Statelessness had become durable: 66 of 104 people lacked citizenship in 1963, and the report for 1 January 1966 recorded no admissions to or releases from Soviet citizenship.[85] The terms "right of asylum" and "refugee" appear nowhere in the reports. In the files of the institution legally responsible for political migrants, status had acquired a life detached from the right under which they had entered.

The question is why a statute was needed in 1961 at all, after four decades without one. One answer lies in a quarrel over authority that had taken place three years earlier in Tashkent. By the mid-1950s one of the largest diasporas of political migrants in the Soviet Union was Greek, concentrated in Tashkent and organized as a branch of the Communist Party of Greece on Soviet soil. In September 1955, it broke apart. Nikos Zachariadis, leader of the Greek party, dissolved its bureau and appointed a replacement himself; six of the dismissed

80 The number is strikingly low, and it perhaps records what KGB had on their books rather than who was living in Ukraine, which is how it sits beside the Red Cross's tens of thousands thousand without contradicting it.

81 Haluzevyi derzhavnyi arkhiv Sluzhby bezpeky Ukrainy (HDA SBU), F. 1, Op. 1, spr. 1664, ark. 209. On the Spanish children in Soviet Ukraine see: Ol'ha Kakovkina. Ispans'ki dity' Ukraïny: emihranty z Ispaniï u Dnipropetrovs'ku ta oblasti u 1950-kh–1980-kh rr., *South Archive* (*Historical Sciences*), no. 51 (2025): 19–29.

82 HDA SBU, F. 1, Op. 1, spr. 1664, ark. 116–135.

83 Ibid., spr. 1673, ark. 2.

84 Derzhavnyi arkhiv Kyivskoi oblasti (DAKO), F. P-5196, Op. 2c, spr. 12, ark. 47–60.

85 Ibid., spr. 14, ark. 49.

were expelled from the party and denounced, in a decision transmitted to Tashkent, as "enemies of the Soviet Union and the CPSU."[86] On the night of 10 to 11 September, there was violence that the political migrants themselves called "bloody Sunday," after which, by their account, some two hundred party members of the Tashkent organization were in the city hospital. A decision by the CC CPSU characterized the events as "dishonest" (*beschestnye*).[87] Their rejection of their leader's claim is the plainest statement of the problem this article has been tracing. Zachariadis, they wrote, "cultivated the ruinous theory of the 'independence' of our party … all the same, the events took place in the Soviet Union," and "there is no other, more authoritative organ … than the CC CPSU."[88] They were living in a state that had granted them the right to be there and had never claimed sole authority to say who they were. When their own party turned on them, they asked the Soviet party to assume that authority, but were denied. The division of authority was a live jurisdictional dispute, and the political migrants lost it. One sentence from the same file gives the whole transition in a participant's voice: Zachariadis told a fellow migrant in 1946, "There is no Comintern now, and you must trust the party."[89]

Codification became an answer to a question of competence. In April 1961, the CPSU Central Committee adopted a resolution on the legal status of political migrants, followed by a Presidium statute. In early summer 1961, Soviet republics began adopting their own resolution on this subject: Ukraine passed its on June 8. The Soviet Red Cross issued instructions for determining belonging among people already granted asylum, and a further statute of 21 July governed aid to "political migrants and persons treated as such."[90] By the end of this sequence, a party initiative became a law, passed through the republics, while a nominally charitable Red Cross commission decided what the terms meant for individuals.

By this point, the right of asylum was treated neither as an alternative to status nor as a stage on the way to it. It had become the premise: belonging was determined individually among those who already possessed the right. The 1961 regulation defines a *politemigrant* as a person "compelled to leave their country because of persecution for revolutionary activity, for the defense of the working people, for participation in the national liberation movement" and for the struggle for peace; it keeps, for members of communist and workers' par-

86 RGANI, F. 5, Op. 28, d. 419, l. 45.
87 Ibid., 46.
88 Ibid., 131.
89 Ibid., 57.
90 TsDAHOU, F. 1, O. 24, spr. 5519, ark. 20.

ties, the requirement of their party's permission; and its fourth clause assigns the determination of belonging to a standing commission of the Soviet Red Cross.[91] What is gone is the quantitative threshold of severity that the 1920s' instructions had introduced. The new system nationalized one key aspect of the Soviet asylum system, transferring authority to determine whether a person belonged to political emigration to a mass organization answerable to the party. The surviving party-permission clause kept the parts of the older arrangement symbolically intact.

Codification did not end case-by-case judgement. In March 1964 the Ukrainian KGB decided that S.L. Domiano and his mother "cannot be recognized as *politemigranty*."[92] Two other documents made the procedure explicit: a February "List of persons who cannot be recognized as *politemigrant*," and a July "List of persons who must be exonerated or recognized."[93] Almost half a century after the 1918 asylum decree, a closed commission was still settling the category name by name.

6 Another Genealogy of Asylum

The Soviet status of a *politemigrant* was never the realization of the right of asylum. It was a separate grant, distinguished from that right in the commission's own wording by December 1927 and still distinguished from it in a Red Cross instruction of June 1961, which set out how belonging to the political emigration was to be determined for persons to whom the right of asylum had already been granted. The status was discretionary, it was revocable without any change in the circumstances of persecution, and temporary by design. In the postwar decades, it was withheld from precisely those whose lives fitted it best. The institution responsible for them did not know how many they were. More than thirty thousand, Georgii Miterev told the Central Committee in November 1955, adding that no accurate register existed.[94] The Soviet apparatus put the question to itself and could not answer it. In the 1927 memo "Who Should Be Considered a Political Migrant?", the author wrote that no strictly established scheme could be applied: each case had to be examined singly. The question had no answer because the apparatus was deciding something else – who had the standing to say what a person was.

91 HDA SBU, F. 1, Op. 1, spr. 1673, ark. 2.
92 Ibid., 211.
93 Ibid., 236–250.
94 RGANI, F. 5, Op. 28, d. 379, ll. 215–217.

Followed across most of the Soviet century, conceptual history yields something rather unexpected: a concept can come apart without any public argument at all, from meeting people it had not been made for. And it did. Each neighboring term in the Soviet vocabulary – *perebezhchik* (defector), *reemigrant*, person treated as equivalent (*priravnennyi*), or persons without citizenship – appeared when the central word failed someone; the order of their appearance is the history of that failure. One word never changed – belonging. The highest Soviet governing bodies used belonging in 1961, and the Red Cross committee in Riga was still formalizing the belonging of a Serbian ex-partisan and a Finnish communist in the 1980s. What changed was not wording, but the hands that used it: in the 1920s, belonging was determined by an assembly of foreign party sections under the auspices of the Soviet Union-led Comintern, and in the early 1960s by a commission of the Soviet Red Cross answerable to the Soviet Party. The decree, thus, nationalized the act of determination. Sixty-six years, and the verb was never to define but to determine belonging. Determination was possible only because two authorities held the question between them: the state that admitted a person, and the party that could name them. That division is what made belonging, rather than danger, the fact on which everything turned.

This history does not make the Soviet Union exceptional. Other empires and states used categories and institutions for refugees outside of Geneva; what distinguished the Soviet case was that the receiving state did not control the category alone.[95] Recent scholarship on migration offers a view of migration as a function of aspirations and capabilities within the opportunity structure.[96] The Soviet case sits awkwardly within this account, as it also invokes the need for authorization. A person might want to reach the Soviet land, but *poltemigrant* status depended on a party both outside of departure and the state of refuge. MOPR's legitimation commission in the 1920s and 1930s could hardly separate political from economic migration. And what they received on arrival was a standing that could be lost through conduct, carried cancellation in its definition, and rested on a potentially expiring permit. This was a movement toward a political project, admitted by one authority and named by another.

95 See: Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky. *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024); Laura Madoroko. *Elusive Refuge: Chinese Migrants in the Cold War*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

96 See: Hein de Haas. "A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework." *Comparative Migration Studies* (Cham) 9 (Art. 8), February 2021: 8.

A conceptual history of *politemigrant* offers the history of migration a different object of study. The people seeking asylum were the constant. The variable was who could confer the status, and the key to it passed through different hands. Granting political asylum in the Soviet Union rested on a relation between authorities, and those who received the status had little part in it. They knew what it was worth all the same. They found patrons, signed appeals, and, once a statute existed, argued in its language. Some kept the word as a personal signifier even after returning from the USSR, such as Ivan Krekmanov, who returned to Bulgaria and, in 1962, published his memoirs under the title *Notes of a Politemigrant*.[97]

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97 Ivan Krekmanov. *Zapiski na politemigranta*. (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Bŭlgarskata komunisticheska partiia, 1962).