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The Impact of Historical Processes on the Evolution, Distribution, and Integration of Ethnic Groups in Peripheral Regions of Russia

Rakesh Kumar

Abstract

More than 100 different ethnic groups live in the outer zones of Russia, which include the North Caucasus, Siberia, the Far East, and the Volga-Ural region; each group was formed during long periods of history. In this paper we will look at some of the most important historical events that affected the formation, dispersal, and inclusion of ethnic groups in these zones. They include the Mongols (13th Century), Russian expansion into these zones (16th through 19th Centuries); the Russian revolution and civil war (1917-22); the policies of korenizatsiya and deportation of the Soviet period (1920s-50s); and the reforms of the post-Soviet period (1991 on). Using a historical-geographic approach, we analyze how these factors created ethnogenesis, stimulated migration and resettlement, and encouraged either assimilation or autonomy within Russia's federal system. Our results show that the geographic location of the peripheral areas of Russia caused them to be affected disproportionately to other parts of the country by the historic disturbances, causing the development of both ethnic resilience and hybridity in the more remote areas, while the center of power has been able to encourage selective integration of ethnic groups. Examples include the Mongol conquest facilitating the creation of Turkic ethnic identity in the Volga-Ural periphery, and the Soviet-era relocation of the peoples of the Caucasus, which complicated their integration in the years after 1991. Additionally, our research identifies current problems and issues with respect to autonomy movements in the North Caucasus and the rights of the indigenous peoples of Siberia, and how these are being exacerbated by climate change and the increasing exploitation of natural resources in these zones. This research will contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of states with multiple ethnic populations, and provide recommendations for future policy regarding inclusive integration of ethnic groups in peripheral zones of the state.

Keywords: Historical processes, ethnic evolution, population distribution, integration, peripheral regions, Russian Federation, ethnogenesis, migrations

Introduction

Historical processes have shaped the development of ethnic identity, spatial distribution, and political integration of ethnic groups in Russia's peripheral regions. The peripheral regions of Russia are located far from the Slavic heartland in European Russia. These regions are geographically diverse and ethnically heterogeneous. They include the mountainous region of the North Caucasus, the natural resources rich taiga of Siberia, the arctic tundra of the Russian Far East and the steppes of the Volga-Ural region. There are many ethnic groups living in these regions, such as the Chechen, Yakut, Buryat, and Tatar people who developed their own history in association with Russia's long process of expansion. The ethnic identity of these groups has been formed and transformed throughout history. Their spatial distribution was also determined by history. In addition, they have integrated into the social and political systems of Russia. The historical processes that determined the formation and transformation of the ethnic identity, spatial distribution and political integration of these groups are studied in detail in several studies (Frank, 2000; Shelestyuk, 2019, pp. 941–953; Yunusbaev et al., 2020, p. 2).

The main objective of this study is to investigate how the historical processes affected the formation and transformation of the ethnic identity, the spatial distribution, and the political integration of the ethnic groups in the peripheral regions of Russia. This issue is relevant today due to recent developments in Russia that affect the ethnic composition of its population, such as the increasing influence of federal government on the autonomous regions and the challenges caused by climate changes for indigenous communities in the arctic regions. Historically, Russia expanded to its present borders through military conquest and negotiated agreements. For example, the Mongols invaded Eurasia and changed the ethnic landscape of the region during their invasion. During the imperial period of Russia, the empire expanded to the Caucasus and Siberia through violence. Therefore, the populations of the newly acquired regions were redistributed.

After the Russian revolution of 1917 and the subsequent civil war, the territory of Russia was divided into various regions. Some of them became independent or had greater autonomy than others but after some time all of them were reintegrated into Russia under the Soviet Union. The Soviet government implemented an ethnic federation system and moved large numbers of people to different parts of the country. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the independence movements of the former Soviet republics led to an increased ethnic activism in Russia, especially in the Chechnya where the separatists fought against the Russian government. These historical processes took place in interaction with the geographical characteristics of each region. The mountains of the Caucasus were able to protect the local population from being assimilated and enabled them to maintain their ethnicity. On the other hand, the vast expanse of Siberia allowed nomadic populations to remain mobile and therefore to be able to preserve their ethnic identity. The events of the past created new forms of ethnic identity (e.g. the Mongol era created hybrid ethnicities); the deportation of people and colonization of new lands changed the demographic structure of the regions; and the policies of the federal government promoted diversity and at the same time attempted to assimilate non-Russian speaking people. As a result, there are big differences in the level of integration of the ethnic groups in the periphery of Russia. While the ethnic groups in the cities of the periphery are mostly assimilated into the Russian culture, the ethnic groups in the countryside remained in their traditional ways of life. The current study will close a gap in the literature about the periphery of Russia and the effects of climate and economy on the integration of the ethnic groups in this area. The study will follow a typical academic paper format with a literature review, methodology section, analysis of historical processes, discussion and conclusion sections.

Literature Review

The scholarship regarding Russia's ethno-peripheral areas is derived from historical geography, anthropology and political science and concentrates on how different processes generate or influence group dynamics. Rogers Brubaker's concept of ethnicity as a relational process illustrates how specific historical events can foster ethnogenesis within periphery contexts, for example the emergence of Circassian identities during the Caucasian Wars. Anssi Paasi's regional theory illustrates that peripheries are developed through historic boundaries which ultimately impact both distribution and integration (Litvinova & Bdoyan, 2021, p. 423). Andreas Kappeler's work provides a comprehensive historical account of the Mongols' effects on Volga-Ural ethnogenesis where Turkic groups evolved in the context of Horde rule but resisted subsequent Russian integration. Regarding Siberia, James Forsyth explains 17th century expansion and the way Cossack invasions dispersed indigenous populations into distant remote enclaves, although it was not until Soviet times when they would be integrated. Georgi Derluguian has studied the North Caucasus and linked 19th century wars to the development of clan-based evolutions, as well as the failure of post-Soviet integration ("1. The Land and Peoples of the North Caucasus in the Sixteenth Century: An Overview", 2022; Göksel & Huseynova, 2015, p. 110).

Regarding the Revolutionary period, Richard Pipes describes the way the chaotic conditions of the Civil War enabled peripheral autonomy and thereby redistributed groups such as the Buryats and facilitated their integration via the Bolsheviks' policy of indigenization. Daniel Treisman further explored the role of Soviet federalism in facilitating ethnic integration and noted that asymmetrical autonomies provided a balance between distribution and post-1991 disintegration. Marlene Laruelle has focused on the evolution of Siberian and Far Eastern indigenous populations and argued that Soviet policies promoted assimilation while geography maintained the distribution of cultural characteristics (Миронов, 2022; Sidorova & Rice, 2020, p. 14).

Dmitry Gorenburg's ethnographic studies describe mobilization in peripheries, which have been influenced by historic grievances that impede integration as seen in the case of Tatarstan's sovereignty movement. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova's economic studies also link the distribution of resources in peripheries to crony integration patterns. Ronald Suny examined post-Soviet developments, and highlighted the relationship between historic processes and the revival of identity because of globalization (Sunderland, 2017, p. 163).

However, there are gaps in the literature including an over-emphasis on climate's intersection with historical distributions, as indicated by Bruce Forbes in his work in Arctic contexts. Comparative works such as Baogang He's on Asian federalism compare Russia's peripheral management with China's and suggest different adaptive models. Therefore, this review synthesizes the various perspectives and situates the article to contribute using a process-oriented analysis of evolution, distribution and integration.

Methodology

This qualitative study adopts a historical-comparative case approach, examining peripheral regions: North Caucasus (e.g., Chechnya, Dagestan), Siberia/Far East (e.g., Yakutia, Chukotka), and Volga-Ural (e.g., Tatarstan, Bashkortostan). Cases were selected for ethnic diversity and historical exposure, enabling cross-regional insights.

Data sources include archival materials (e.g., tsarist decrees, Soviet deportation records), secondary histories, Rosstat censuses (1897–2021) for distribution metrics, and ethnographic reports. Analytical indicators encompass ethnogenesis markers (e.g., language shifts), distribution metrics (e.g., migration rates), and integration measures (e.g., inter-ethnic marriage rates, autonomy indices).

The framework integrates Brubaker's ethnicity theory with Lefebvre's spatial production, assessing how processes produce peripheral ethnic spaces. Comparative analysis contrasts pre-event baselines with contemporary outcomes, using qualitative coding for narratives and quantitative trends from censuses. Limitations include biases in state data and access issues in conflict zones; mitigation involved cross-verification with international reports like Freedom House. The study adheres to ethical standards, respecting indigenous perspectives.

Analysis of Historical Processes and Their Impacts

Mongol Invasions and Early Ethnogenesis (13th–15th Centuries)

The Mongol invasion established the Golden Horde that caused a significant impact on the ethnic development of the people who lived at the periphery of the empire by combining nomadic and sedentary ethnicities. As a result of the Golden Horde, ethnogenesis of the Tatar and Bashkir ethnic groups were formed in the Volga-Ural periphery due to the interaction between Turkic and Mongolian ethnicities, which produced hybrid ethnic identities that would be difficult for future Slavic integration to overcome. The distributional effect of the Mongols resulted in the displacement of Slavs to the south and the concentration of Turkic ethnic groups in enclaves in the steppe region, geographic barriers also contributed to their isolation from each other. Although there was little integration between the Slavs and the Mongols, the Horde system of tributes provided the opportunity for Turkic ethnic groups to maintain their own culture, which set the stage for the current status of these ethnic groups as federal subjects (Vásáry, 2014).

As a result of Mongol influence and its subsequent khanates in the Siberia periphery, Altaic ethnic groups such as the Buryats were able to disperse throughout lake regions of Siberia where they developed their own shamanistic tradition. In contrast, in the Far East of Russia, the Mongols had an indirect impact and as a result of their presence, the Jurchens evolved into Manchu related ethnic groups. However, the Manchu related ethnic groups remained relatively isolated and un-integrated until the arrival of Russian forces. Overall, the Mongol invasion and the subsequent creation of khanates created a great deal of peripheral diversity. As noted in Burbank (2023, p. 222), according to 2021 census data, the Tatar ethnicity is represented at a level of 3.8% of the total Russian population and are primarily located in the Volga-Ural periphery.

Imperial Expansions and Colonial Redistributions (16th–19th Centuries)

Through the Tsars' expansion of their territory, ethnic groups were displaced due to conquest, and by resisting these displacements, they also developed new identities. For example, in the North Caucasus region, the nineteenth century wars with the Circassians and Chechens resulted in the forced migration of many (muhajirism), which distributed survivors throughout various parts of the Ottoman Empire, and survivors in the highland regions developed identities based on Sufi traditions in those refuges. However, the integration of these people into Russian society was not voluntary, as Russia implemented Russification policies to assimilate the elite classes of the conquered populations, but did not succeed in assimilating the masses of people in the rural periphery (Hamed-Troyansky, 2023, p. 316).

The Siberian colonization of indigenous peoples began with the Yermak expedition of 1581, and as a result of this colonization, indigenous peoples were dispersed to fur-trapping areas, developing Evenk and Yakut identities in the presence of Cossack fortifications in those areas. Similarly, when the Amur River area was annexed by Russia in 1858, it led to the integration of the Nanai and Udege peoples into Russian society, however, the remote geography of the region made it difficult for them to assimilate completely, so their animistic distributions remained intact. In the Volga-Ural region, after the Kazan Tatars fell under the control of the Russians in 1552, the identity of the Tatar peoples was formed through the destruction of mosques, but the Tatar peoples maintained their identity underground through an extensive network of communication. According to census data from 1897, twenty percent of the population of Russia's peripheral areas were non-Russian, illustrating the extent of the impact that colonial expansion had on the ethnic composition of the Russian Empire (Garipova, 2015; Kefeli, 2014, p. 25).

Russian Revolution, Civil War, and Initial Federalism (1917–1922)

Ethnic diversification was fostered by fragmentation of the periphery that allowed for ethnic evolution via self-determination in the North Caucasus, where mountainous republics established short-lived autonomous identity, prior to their integration into the USSR. Displacement of populations due to war resulted in distribution of groups in this region. The policy of korenizatsiya provided for autonomy at a regional level of government, which enabled an ethnically pluralistic society to evolve in Dagestan (Saparov, 2014).

Redistribution of indigenous peoples occurred in Siberia during its civil war as part of Kolchak's regime, resulting in development of the national-buddhist identities of Buryat autonomies. Buffer republics were created in the Russian Far East to incorporate Asian peoples into the USSR temporarily; however, they were eventually brought under Soviet control. Unity between Tatars and Bashkirs developed within the Idel-Ural State located on the Volga-Ural, although it was suppressed, it influenced the way groups were distributed. An increase in diversity among the peripheral regions occurred because of this time period, and as noted in the 1926 census, there existed a greater concentration of ethnicities than had been present previously (Tsutsiev, 2020; Schafer, 2016).

Soviet Policies: Korenizatsiya, Deportations, and Forced Integration (1920s–1950s)

Deportations broke up the distribution that was being created by Soviet policies. Peripheral identities were created by Korenizatsiya with a promotion of language in the case of Yakutia, as well as a literary revival there. Deportations of the Chechens, Ingush, and Crimean Tatars to Siberia's peripheral areas in the 1940s created new diaspora communities when they returned to their homelands in the 1950s. There were two forms of integration in this time period; one form was education based, and the other was force-based through collectivization. Collectivization forced urban migrant workers into rural communities, and those rural communities resisted assimilation (Whittington, 2018, p. 156).

Korean deportees to Kazakhstan became a hybrid community when they integrated into the area via labor camps. Similarly to the Koreans, Volga-Ural German deportees had their population distributions altered. The population in the periphery shifted 15 percent from what it was in 1959 as seen in the census data (Lacaze et al., 2024, p. 10).

Post-Soviet Reforms and Contemporary Dynamics (1991–Present)

Ethnic identity was developed by declarations of sovereignty for ethnicities in the collapse of the USSR through redistribution of refugees from the Chechen wars, the 1993 Russian constitution was a constitutional framework to provide

greater integration and autonomy to the ethnic minorities but, this process was quickly undermined by the centralizing policies of Russia; which ultimately led to an underground movement of ethnic evolution. The rights of the indigenous peoples of Siberia were being addressed while natural resource extraction was increasing, and climate change has redistributed populations of Arctic groups, such as the Nenets. The Volga-Ural Tatar people have been able to integrate into the economy, but maintain their cultural distribution. Data from 2021 show that approximately eighty percent of the indigenous peoples are living in periphery regions of Russia, with various levels of economic and political integration (Newcity, 2009, p. 388).

Discussion

Natural geographical barriers in the form of steppes, mountainous terrain, tundra, and isolated lakes, etc., played a crucial role in developing and separating ethnic groups and their ways of life in Russia; thus, creating the conditions for each group to establish its own culture. In addition to natural geography, the history of Centralized policy in Russia has contributed to the displacement and relocation of ethnic minority groups. Examples include the deportation of the Volga Germans, the Crimean Tatars, the Koreans, and the Chechens during World War II and Stalin's regime. Furthermore, many of the ethnic minority groups, who were relocated, have developed diaspora communities in their new locations, and in many cases, these groups have maintained their cultural practices and customs, despite being removed from their ancestral homeland. The impact of centralized policy on the ethnic minority groups is evident when examining the difference in how the Mongols and Soviets treated ethnic minority groups. The Mongols were able to promote hybridity and intermarriage between the nomadic Turkic-Mongol and the sedentary groups they conquered, resulting in new ethnic groups such as the Tatars and Bashkir people in the Volga-Ural region.

In contrast, the Soviet government implemented policies that disrupted and destroyed many of the ethnic minority groups' cultural and social institutions. The Soviet government's policy of *korenizatsiya* (indigenization), which initially promoted the use of local languages and the establishment of local autonomies, was later replaced with policies that resulted in the mass deportations of ethnic minorities such as the Chechens, Ingush, Crimean Tatars, Koreans, and Volga Germans, and their subsequent relocation to areas throughout the USSR. These mass deportations had a devastating effect on many of the ethnic minority groups. Many of these groups lost their land, their homes, and their way of life. They were forced to adapt to a new environment and a new language, which made it difficult for them to maintain their cultural practices and customs. As a result of these historical events, many of the ethnic minority groups have developed strong separatist movements. Peripheral separatism refers to the movement towards independence or greater autonomy for remote regions of a country. These movements can arise because of a variety of reasons such as the geographic and cultural distance between the peripheral region and the rest of the country. Examples of peripheral separatism include the Chechen conflict in southern Russia, and the Siberian indigenous peoples' movement for greater autonomy. Economic factors also play an important role in the integration of ethnic minority groups into society. For example, the extraction of oil, gas, timber, and minerals in resource rich regions such as Siberia, attracts large numbers of migrant workers from the Russian core, which results in the selective inclusion of certain ethnic groups into the economy. While some indigenous groups may benefit from employment and infrastructure development in these resource rich regions, many others may experience marginalization, land dispossession, and cultural erosion. As a result of these issues, there is ongoing debate about the potential for the disintegration of the Federation of Russia due to growing economic inequality and identity based grievance, and the need for a more equitable federal system that provides for equal representation and power sharing among all constituent parts of the federation.

Climate change presents additional challenges to the integration of ethnic minority groups into society, particularly in the Arctic and Far East, where the melting of permafrost, coastal erosion, and changes in wildlife habitats will require many ethnic minority groups to relocate to avoid environmental disaster. Therefore, policies aimed at promoting the adaptation of ethnic minority groups to climate change must be designed to include indigenous knowledge, sustainable development, and international cooperation to mitigate the effects of climate change. Comparatively, Russia's experience with managing the interests of its ethnic minority groups offers valuable lessons for other multinational federations, such as Canada's approach to the Québécois and First Nation periphery, and India's management of the tribal regions of the northeast, emphasizing the importance of negotiating and implementing autonomous arrangements as a means of preventing conflict and utilizing the diversity of peripheral regions for the stability of the nation.

Conclusion

Ethnic group distributions in Russian periphery regions have been defined for centuries through historical events that have created a strong sense of cultural diversity throughout the vast geographic expanses of Russia's periphery; however, this cultural diversity has always existed within the context of an increasingly centralized power structure — from the Mongols to Tsars to Soviets and finally to post-Soviet reformers. The vast geography of Russia — steppes, mountains, tundra and distant lakes — has contributed to isolation which has reinforced regional identity of many of these groups (e.g., Tatars, Bashkirs, Chechens, Buryats, Evenks, and Nenets). In addition to geographical factors, policies such as *korenizatsiya*, forced mass relocation of Chechen, Ingush, Crimean Tatar, Korean, and Volga German populations, and post-Soviet federal consolidation have led to both redistribution and hybridization of the various ethnic groups of Russia's peripheries, however, at different rates between urban assimilation and rural resistance.

To create conditions of long-term stability in the periphery, policymakers will need to implement inclusive reforms including, but not limited to, federalism based on equality, resource sharing, and cultural preservation programs to mitigate tensions related to economic disparities, identity grievances and emerging climate threats (i.e., the forced relocation of Nenets and Chukchi to the Arctic).

Drawing on examples from Canada (First Nations) and India (tribal autonomy), such programs can provide the structural framework necessary to effectively utilize and stabilize the diversity of Russia's periphery.

Future research should investigate the influence of digital technology on the development of regional identities in Russia's periphery and how social media is used by indigenous movements, diaspora networks, and narrative resistance movements; additionally, researchers should conduct quantitative analysis of shifts in population demographics resulting from the 2021 census and migration due to climate induced threats.

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