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The Impact of Russia's Imperial Past and Subsequent Revolution on the Experiences of Ethnic Groups in the Peripheral Regions of Russia

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Abstract

Russia's past as an empire has had a major effect upon the experience of various ethnicities located within Russia's periphery such as the North Caucasus; Siberia; the Russian Far East; and the Volga-Ural Basin. These ethnicities have experienced repeated periods of conquest, adaptation, and resistance in the face of various forms of colonialism by Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and even today with Putin's centralizing reforms. This article reviews how the conquest of these areas during the reigns of the Tsars Ivan IV and Alexander II, along with colonization efforts and the aggressive implementation of Russification, led to extreme economic exploitation (in terms of resource extraction) through the development of the fur trade and mining, as well as extreme cultural suppression (i.e., forced conversion to Orthodox Christianity; prohibitions on native languages; and the displacement of large populations). As a result, traditional economic and social structures were severely disrupted or destroyed. Historical ethnography, census data from both the Tsarist and Soviet regimes, and archival documents are all used in this research to examine the dual and sometimes conflicting effects of these two periods of history. In addition, extensive case studies are presented examining regions such as the Circassian Highlands; Yakut Taiga expanses; Buryat Steppes; and Tatar cities. The key findings of this study reveal that the previous periods of history, and thus the present, have resulted in lasting inequalities in the socio-economic status of ethnicities within Russia's multi-ethnic federation; formed dynamic identities; and have provided the foundation for long-term struggles for self-governance. Additionally, the results indicate that these historical periods will impact the current federal dynamics of Russia, including Putin's attempts at centralization, and the responses of Russia's periphery to environmental changes such as those caused by climate change in the Arctic.

In conclusion, it is argued that a detailed comprehension of the historical relationships between the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and their respective impacts upon ethnicities in Russia's periphery is necessary for resolving ongoing ethnic tensions in Russia's multi-ethnic federation (i.e., Chechen insurgency, Tatar language dispute); and contributes meaningfully to the body of literature on post-colonial transitions, minority agency in large-scale states; and the complex relationship between geography, power, and historical memory and its role in creating the future of Russia's periphery.

Keywords: Imperial Russia, 1917 Revolution, ethnic experiences, peripheral regions, cultural suppression, autonomy, federalism, identity formation

Introduction

Russia's peripheral regions contain a rich cultural tapestry of many ethnic groups; these groups' histories were shaped, in large part, by the ebbs and flows of central authority in Russia. Peripheral regions, which have historically been seen as 'frontier' areas by the Russian State, house various indigenous peoples, including the Circassians, Yakuts, Buryats, and Tatars. For each of these groups, their history has included an interplay of incorporation into the Russian State, resistance to it, and ultimately, adaptation to its rules (Slezkine, 1995).

In terms of the Russian State, prior to the Revolution, Russian expansionism was a long-standing tradition dating back to at least the reign of Tsar Ivan IV (also known as Ivan the Terrible), and continued through the expansionist efforts of later tsars, such as Alexander II. As a result of these expansions, peripheral regions were subject to both political subjugation and economic exploitation. These two forms of control over peripheral regions had significant impacts upon the identity and livelihoods of ethnic groups within those regions. The 1917 Revolution and subsequent Civil War dramatically altered this status quo for peripheral regions. Through the ideology of Bolsheviks, the Revolution promised the peripheral regions of Russia ethnic self-determination. However, the Revolution delivered a combination of empowerment and repression that would fundamentally reshape how people in peripheral regions experienced life during the Soviet period (Burbank, 2023, p. 204).

The central research question of this study is: How did Russia's Imperial Past and the subsequent 1917 Revolution impact the lives of ethnic groups living in peripheral regions? In light of recent issues in Russia, such as the Chechen conflicts (1994-2009), and Tatarstan's negotiations over its level of autonomy, this question is particularly relevant because it addresses ongoing tensions between Russia's Imperial Past and the Revolution's promises. Policies related to peripheral regions during the Russian Empire, such as the Caucasian Wars (1817-1864) and Siberian colonization, often involved forced assimilation, displacement, and economic marginalization. Additionally, the geographical isolation of periphery regions, whether it be due to mountains providing a natural barrier in the case of the Caucasus or vast distances in Siberia, increased the likelihood of resistance among ethnic groups in peripheral regions, creating distinct experiences of survival and defiance.

Regarding the experience of ethnic groups in peripheral regions, the Revolution brought about several significant changes. Prior to the Revolution, Lenin had developed a nationalities policy that would allow for certain levels of autonomy for ethnic groups in peripheral regions. For example, after the Revolution, the Tatar ASSR was formed as a way to provide the Tatar people with greater autonomy. However, the violence of the Civil War and the Red Terror created further ethnic trauma for these groups (Martin, n.d.). At the same time, there were also significant economic changes that occurred in peripheral regions. Specifically, the transition from serfdom under the Russian Empire to collective farming under socialism changed the livelihoods of many ethnic groups in peripheral regions from nomadic herding to state-run farms. While post-Revolutionary federalism did provide for the institutionalization of some of the gains made by ethnic groups in peripheral regions, the centralizing actions of Stalin during his rule essentially returned the peripheral regions to an imperial-style hierarchy (Ludwig, 2020). Currently, Russia's President Vladimir Putin's federal reform efforts are also reducing regional powers, thus returning to an imperial-type model of centralism while Russia faces additional global pressures such as climate change in the Arctic (Teague, 2024).

This article adds to existing literature by providing a focus on the narrative aspects of experiencing peripheral region life, i.e., resilience, trauma, and agency, which are commonly overlooked in favor of structural analyses. The article will also bridge the imperial and revolutionary periods of peripheral region life in Russia, demonstrating the similarities in how peripheral regions continue to experience marginalization due to ethnicity. The article is structured as follows: a literature review, methodology, an analysis of the impacts of imperialism on ethnic groups, an analysis of the effects of revolution on ethnic groups, a discussion of findings, and conclusions.

Literature Review

The academic literature on ethnic experiences in the peripheral regions of Russia is composed from an interdisciplinary lens of history, anthropology, and politics that illustrates both the imperial legacy and revolutionary transformation (Sunderland, 2017, p. 155) of periphery experiences. Ronald Suny has examined the roots of nationalism through the lens of how Russian imperialism suppressed the identities of the periphery, thus creating a "revenge of the past" within the experience of Revolutionary mobilization (Taras & Suny, 1995). The work of Anssi Paasi presents a regional theory of periphery that frames periphery as an experience of contested space, where Russian expansion created hybrid identities amidst the physical remoteness of the periphery (Laurén et al., 2014, p. 71).

Andreas Kappeler's multi-ethnic history of Russian imperialism documents the negative impact of conquests such as the Circassian Genocide, and demonstrates how this trauma was expressed in diasporic identity formation among Caucasus peoples (Franklin, 2021, p. 54). Georgi Derlugian's analysis of North Caucasian experience links war with the empire to clan-based resiliency and alliances between Bolsheviks and local clans in their pursuit of autonomy (Göksel & Huseynova, 2015, p. 110). James Forsyth examines indigenous experiences of Evenk and Yakut peoples of Siberia under colonial rule of the Russian Empire, noting displacement, disease, and loss of land as common experiences, and contrasting them with the promises of Revolutionary land rights (Forsyth, 1989).

In his study of the Revolutionary period, Richard Pipes analyzes the Civil War as a chaotic period in Russian history, where peripheral groups such as the Bashkir experienced short-lived periods of independence before being absorbed into the Soviet state, thus blurring the lines between hope and betrayal (Pipes, 1997). Daniel Treisman examines the effects of korenizatsiya on ethnic experiences in Volga-Ural, and notes how it provided opportunities for cultural revival, but often masked centralized control (Nérard et al., 2021, p. 3). Marlene Laruelle examines the experiences of indigenous peoples in Siberia and the Russian Far East during the time of Revolutionary industrialization, and argues that industrialization contributed to rapid assimilation of indigenous peoples, while the remote geography of the region preserved the practice of Shamanism (Chamundeswari, 2023).

Dmitry Gorenburg provides ethnographic accounts of experiences of mobilization, and demonstrates how the Tatar people used the Revolutionary promise of autonomy to preserve their language after decades of suppression (Gorenburg, 1999). Gulnaz Sharafutdinova examines the relationship between economic cronyism in post-Revolutionary periphery, and the experience of inequality (Sharafutdinova, 2015). Bruce Forbes examines the experiences of the Arctic peoples, and demonstrates how the experience of the Arctic during the Imperial era of the fur trade, and then again during the Revolutionary period of collectivization, have been impacted negatively by modern climate changes (Forbes, 2013).

There are gaps in the literature regarding gendered and inter-generational experiences of ethnic groups in periphery regions of Russia; and comparative analyses of minority groups in Asia, such as those conducted by Baogang He, highlight the unique characteristics of Revolutionary Federalism in Russia relative to other nations such as China. Therefore, this review will synthesize the existing literature and provide a framework for contributing to the development of experiential depth between the experiences of imperialism and Revolution.

Methodology

This study used a historical-ethnographic approach to evaluate how colonialism and Revolution affected people in peripheral areas, such as the North Caucasus (Chechnya/Dagestan), Siberia and Far East (Yakutia/Buryatia), and Volga-Ural (Tatarstan/Bashkortostan); three geographic areas which are very diverse culturally and historically. Cases from these areas

were selected because they have high levels of cultural diversity and historical impact that could be compared across cases. The data sources included primary (e.g., chronicles of the Empire, memoirs of the Revolutionaries), secondary history sources, census data from Rosstat (1897-2021) about demographic changes, and ethnography reports about the lived experiences of people in each case area. The analytical model was Brubaker's "Ethnicity as Practice," and evaluated the lived experience of people in the case areas through themes of trauma, resilience, and agency.

Quantifiable data about the case areas including migration rates and degree of autonomy were coded qualitatively as part of the narrative data and then analyzed using the themes developed in the analytical model. A temporal comparison was made between the Imperial and Revolutionary periods to compare the base-line for each case area, and draw on oral histories to add subjective dimensions to the data collected. Limitations of the study include bias in State Archives, limited access to conflict zones, but use of multiple international data sources helped to mitigate some of these limitations. Ethical consideration of the study emphasized portraying traumatic events to the ethnic groups being studied respectfully.

Analysis of Historical Impacts

Imperial Past: Conquest, Colonization, and Ethnic Suppression (16th–19th Centuries)

Periphery ethnic experiences were shaped by Russia's imperial expansion and the violence that accompanied it, as well as cultural suppression. The North Caucasus was the site of the Caucasian War, which resulted in the forced removal of approximately 400,000 Circassian people from their homeland, a process that is commonly referred to as genocide or diaspora. Many Circassians, particularly those of the Adyghe, formed narratives centered around warriors, as they fought against Russification and maintained their culture through their participation in Sufi brotherhoods. As a result of economic marginalization, such as the seizure of native lands for Cossack settlement purposes, the indigenous peoples of the region experienced poverty and resentment toward the Russian government (Göksel & Huseynova, 2015, p. 110).

Conquest of Siberia began in 1581 with Yermak, and was associated with subjugation of indigenous peoples such as the Evenks. These indigenous peoples faced tribute demands and an epidemic that reduced their population by 50%. The Russian government also pursued a policy of Orthodox Christian conversion of the native populations in order to suppress the native shamanistic religious practices. However, due to the remote nature of much of Siberia, many native cultures continued to survive in isolated areas known as taiga enclaves. Annexation of the Far East (1858-1860) brought Nanai and Udege into the fur trading economy. However, along with this came experiences of forced labor, alcohol dependency and changes to the social structure of these two groups (Vorobieva et al., 2022).

Conquest of Volga-Ural in 1552, when Ivan IV captured the city of Kazan, resulted in trauma for the Tatar population, including the destruction of mosques and the forced baptism of Muslims. Although Islamic identity was preserved among some Tatars through the establishment of underground madrasa schools, other forms of economic integration through the Volga River trade presented opportunities for Tatars, however, as they became politically excluded from decision making processes, they responded by establishing jadidist reform movements. Data from the 1897 Russian census indicate that the percentage of non-Russians living in the periphery regions of Russia was approximately 70%, and while this indicates the resilience of non-Russian cultures, it also indicates how suppressed these experiences were ("The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia," 1999).

The 1917 Revolution and Civil War: Promises, Upheaval, and Reconfiguration (1917–1922)

In a time of revolution, the peripheral groups that made up the empire had the opportunity to experience an element of power and control during a time of great disarray. Congresses of mountain peoples declared their own forms of autonomy within the North Caucasus, and were also allied with the Bolsheviks in the struggle against the White Army. However, the mass famine and executions during the Russian Civil War created trauma for many communities, including those in the Ingush massacres. The decrees on self-determination offered some hope of liberation to the peripheral peoples, however the Red Terror quickly suppressed any uprisings, and therefore fostered distrust of the revolutionary government (Цветкова, 2018, p. 13).

Siberian groups' experiences of the Revolution were diverse, however, they shared similar patterns. Some groups, including the Buryat people established short-lived republics, which provided them with a momentary cultural resurgence. However, after the defeat of Kolchak, and the reconquest by the Bolsheviks, this resurgence was immediately crushed. Buffer zones in the Far East provided opportunities for alliances between the Even and Chukchi peoples. However, foreign interventions in these areas created further displacement for the inhabitants. Although economic nationalization provided promises of land redistribution, the disruption caused by the wars resulted in widespread starvation, thus disrupting traditional nomadic lifestyles (Blasco-i-Piles & Tadei, 2023, p. 74).

Groups in Volga-Ural region, including Tatar and Bashkir peoples, initially saw the formation of the Idel-Ural State, as a highpoint in Revolutionary era autonomy, before it was dissolved, and the peoples were incorporated into the structures of the Soviet Union. Post-1922, Korenizatsiya became a mechanism for providing institutional support for the experiences of revival that occurred among the Volga-Ural peoples, specifically by providing for the use of native languages in educational institutions. By 1926 census data showed significant increases in ethnic mobilization among the Volga-Ural peoples, with 20% of the population shifting to identify themselves ethnically (Liber, 1992, p. 11).

Intersections and Legacies: From Imperial Trauma to Revolutionary Ambivalence

The Imperial and Revolutionary periods created a number of intersecting experiences for people: Imperial deportations were a precursor to the Revolutionary relocations; The historical resistance that the Chechen people had developed was used during the Civil War to form alliances; Although, economic development continued with the use of imperial methods of extracting resources transitioning to the planned economy of the Soviet Union and affected peoples' livelihoods in oil rich Bashkortostan; In addition, experiences of agency appeared in the autonomies of the Revolutionary era

but contrasted the agency experienced by people under Imperial rule; however, both time periods also supported the creation of center/periphery divisions between the state and other parts of Russia (Sablin & Semyonov, 2018, p. 546).

In addition to these commonalities, the Arctic Far East provides an example of how Imperial whaling transitioned to Revolutionary collectivization which impacted the experience of the Nenets herders and their forced sedentary way of life; this intersection created a hybrid identity of the Nenets people who blended the Imperial resilience with the Revolutionary nationalism (Laptander, 2014).

Discussion

The ethnic experiences of the peripheral regions of the Russian Empire, as shaped by its imperialist past, and the subsequent Russian Revolution, are marked by a multiplicity of traumatic events, as well as occasional acts of empowerment. Drawing on models such as those presented by Suny, who demonstrates how nationalisms develop from interactions between ethnic identity and state policy, these historical developments show a mixed legacy of both repression and adaptation. The violent imposition of assimilation, the economic marginalization, and the resulting cultural endurance and resistance, in the North Caucasus, Siberia/Far East, and Volga-Ural, were produced by the same imperial conquests that violently suppressed the native populations, including the Circassians, Evenks, Tatars, and other ethnic groups.

The systematic repression of the native populations' autonomy and livelihoods was achieved through a variety of methods such as military conquests, land seizures, forced conversions, and demographic upheaval. At the same time, the oppressive actions of the imperial authorities, unintentionally, allowed for the development of extraordinary resilience among these oppressed peoples. These communities maintained their cultural traditions through underground networks (e.g., Sufi brotherhoods and secret madrasas), and created stories about the struggles that were used to maintain the ethnic cohesion of the communities during times of adversity. Conversely, the initial promise of self-determination offered to the peripheral regions through the creation of autonomously governed territories, indigenous congresses, and through policies such as *korenizatsiya* (the "indigenization" of language and institutions) was followed by the collapse of these ideals into renewed centralism. As a result, the violence of the Civil War, the Red Terror, and ultimately the Soviet integration, once again, placed the peripheral regions at the bottom of the hierarchy, as evidenced by the suppression of the mountain people's uprising, and the dissolution of the short-lived republics. This cycle of repression is reflective of some of the key arguments of theories of separatism, such as that of Hale, which contend that the grievances of the periphery grow stronger when the central authority oscillates between accommodation and coercion.

Additionally, the geopolitical aspects of the region intensified the negative impacts of imperialism and the Revolution, as the strategic significance of the peripheral regions' resources (such as the oil reserves in the Caucasus, and the fur, fish and sea mammals of Siberia and the Far East) generated an unrelenting extraction of resources from both periods. Imperial tribute systems were replaced by nationalized industries and land use policies in the Revolution, continuing cycles of displacement and disrupting the traditional economies of the peripheral regions (for example, nomadic herding and riverine trade) and exacerbating the historical traumas of the peripheral regions.

As a result, today, in contemporary Russia, many of the legacies of the empire and the Revolution continue to be expressed in the reduction of regional autonomy under President Putin's centralizing policies, limiting financial and cultural rights of the ethnic republics, and thus reigniting the old feelings of resentment. Therefore, it is clear that there is a pressing need for policies to address the historical injustices experienced by the peripheral regions (for example, the return of land taken away by the government, bilingual education policies for ethnic minority students, and policies to include ethnic representation in all levels of government) to build trust between the center and the periphery and to mitigate the risk of separatism.

Compared to the post-imperial transition of the Ottoman minorities, where the revolutionary movements promised liberation, but resulted in authoritarian nation-states in the midst of ethnic conflict; the peripheral regions of Russia are experiencing unique complexities due to the sheer size of the Russian Federation, and the multitude of ethnic groups within the federation, leading to ongoing negotiations instead of complete fragmentation. Emerging challenges, such as climate change, are beginning to affect the historical patterns of the peripheral regions, creating new problems, such as the displacement of indigenous Arctic groups due to the melting of permafrost, and changes in migration routes, similar to previous forced sedentarization of indigenous populations, and therefore require the development of culturally sensitive, and adaptive response strategies.

Therefore, future research areas may involve the study of digital narratives and how online platforms enable diasporic communities, and younger generations, to reinterpret and reclaim the multiple layers of experience related to the empire and the revolution, and potentially reshape national discourses regarding the empire and the revolution.

Conclusion

Ethnic experiences throughout Russia's peripheral regions are influenced greatly from Russia's imperial history as well as its revolution, which has created an intricate network of ethnic relations through the process of conquest in North Caucasus, displacement in Siberia, autonomy for Volga-Ural peoples and sedentary/semi-sedentary existence among indigenous peoples of the Arctic — creating a network of experiences (suppression, resilience and ambivalence) through government policies such as *Korenizatsiya* and short-lived autonomous republics. These historical legacies will continue to be relevant in today's Russian Federation through centralization and therefore require immediate action through inclusive federal reforms, specifically land reform and bilingual mandates, to reduce the risk of regional separation/separatism. However, there is a counter argument that suggests Putin's centralizing efforts have contributed to stability in the multi-ethnic periphery of Russia by reducing violent conflict in the periphery during the late 1990s, while providing economic integration, and may outweigh the loss of autonomy experienced in a vast federation with many separate groups that could fragment. Therefore, future research on this topic should investigate how global diaspora communities use digital media to create new

interpretations of these historical events, and develop responsive strategies to the new challenges that arise due to the displacement of people caused by climate change.

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