The Role of Historical Events in Shaping Ethno-Cultural Landscapes in Russia

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Abstract

Historical events over the last seven hundred years have influenced ethno-cultural configurations of geographic space in Russia. Ethno-cultural landscapes are characterized by settlement location, cultural practices, language distribution, and symbolic territory, creating a rich tapestry across space and time. The fragmentation of Slavic principalities due to Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century, the introduction of nomadic ways of life, the sixteenth century conquest of Kazan by Ivan the Terrible, nineteenth-century conflicts in the Caucasus region, the disruption of the Russian civil war and subsequent Soviet policies such as korenizatsiya (indigenization) and large-scale deportations, and changes in ethnic composition after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 all have created a diverse geography with various types of interactions with Russia's extensive geography. Indigenous peoples preserved their traditional shamanistic beliefs while living in vast Siberian forests or tundras; the ruggedness of the North Caucasus Mountains provided a stronghold for ethnic resistance that was passed down through generations; and the open plains of the Volga-Ural Steppes allowed for migration and intermingling of cultures. The combined effects of these factors have created long-term patterns of ethnic diversity, provided the foundation for strong cultural identity based upon survival narratives, and spurred continuing demands for greater regional autonomy within the federation. This article will examine how major historical events (e.g., the Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century, the expansion of the Russian Empire during the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, the Russian Civil War between 1917 and 1922, Soviet era policies of korenizatsiya and deportation/migration of populations from 1920 through 1950, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991) have significantly affected these ethno-cultural landscapes. Using historical geography, ethnographic methods, and political science theory, the study will argue that these events not only altered the borders of territorial units, but also developed a pattern of ethnic separation, cultural mixing, and autonomy-seeking. A comparative analysis of areas such as the North Caucasus, Volga-Ural, and Siberia will provide evidence that disruptive events utilized topographical characteristics to develop resiliency among peripherally located ethnic groups, whereas centralizing activities led to assimilationist efforts in centrally located areas. The article will highlight the long-term impacts of historical events, including contemporary issues with federalism, and present potential policy solutions to help govern multi-ethnic states. Overall, this research seeks to understand how history and space interactively create ethno-cultural patterns in expansive federations.

Keywords: Historical events, ethno-cultural landscapes, ethnic diversity, cultural identity, regional autonomy, Russian Federation, Mongol invasions, Russian Civil War

Introduction

Ethnic and cultural landscapes in Russia stem from the country's massive geographic scale and chaotic past of invasions, conquests, revolutions and other changes to the political landscape (Prina, 2011). Russia, from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean, includes 190 plus ethnic groups. Each of the ethnic groups has unique languages, customs and a territorial base for those customs created through historical contingency (Perrie et al., 2006). The paper will discuss how historical events contributed to the development of ethno-cultural landscapes, particularly how historical events influenced diversity among ethnic populations, the formation of ethnic group cultural identities, and the movement towards self-governance within various ethnic groups. The primary question guiding this research is: What influence did historical events like the Mongol invasions and the Russian Civil War have in creating ethno-cultural landscapes in Russia? This question goes beyond simply listing historical events; it examines the relationship between historical events and geography, where mountains, rivers, plains and distance can either enhance or diminish the impact of history. For example, Siberia's vast and remote forest areas served as a safe haven for indigenous people during the invasions and allowed them to preserve their cultural identities.

In contrast, cities in European Russia were centers for assimilation during periods of Imperial expansion. The creation of Russia as a multi-ethnic empire began in the 9th century with the Kievan Rus' state. However, the Mongol invasions established a pattern of nomadic domination over sedentary Slavic principalities (Burbank, 2023, p. 202). Events after the Mongol invasions, including Ivan the Terrible's conquest of Kazan in 1552, indicated the beginning of a deliberate program of territorial expansion. This expansion included the incorporation of ethnically diverse territories into a centralized state (Drozdova, 2021, p. 351). During the 19th century, there were the Caucasian Wars, which suppressed ethnic groups living in the mountainous regions of the Caucasus. These wars established a legacy of resistance. The Bolshevik Revolution and the resulting Civil War disrupted this imperial order and led to the establishment of the Soviet Union's ethnic federalism. Ethnic federalism formally recognized ethnic autonomies but also established a precedent for mass deportations. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 once again revived debate regarding regional autonomy as evidenced by the two wars in Chechnya.

These events have had lasting effects: diversity exists among ethnic groups in peripheral regions because of historical patterns of isolation; many of the cultural identities of ethnic groups today are based upon histories of survival against conquest; and, many contemporary movements for regional autonomy are based upon historical grievances. The relevance of this study is evident in the context of the current federal issues facing Russia, and the recent conflict in Ukraine that has affected ethnic minorities. The combination of a historical perspective and a geographic perspective provide a methodological framework for bridging a gap in literature that often separates historical analysis and geographic analysis.

The organization of this paper follows the structure of a literature review, methodology, case studies of specific historical events, discussion of broader implications, and conclusion.

Literature Review

Although scholarship about Russia's ethnocultural landscapes has been based upon research in historical geography, anthropology and political science, and have described how events have shaped spatial identities, few authors have emphasized how historical events shape spatial identities. Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 1985) has described how historical narratives are constructed into ethnic boundaries, specifically in multi-ethnic empires such as Russia. Events of conquest, for example, have created a common identity among ethnic groups in multi-ethnic empires; Anssi Paasi has extended this view, describing how regional consciousness is developed through social processes of production of history (Paasi, 2003), and how events of invasion can create regional consciousness tied to geography.

Andreas Kappeler (Weeks, 2006) has examined the influence of the Mongols' use of administrative tolerance of ethnic diversity in the Russian Empire, compared to later Russification policies. Marlene Laruelle has explored how Siberian indigenous identities have been linked to historical expansion, and how the geographical isolation of the region has preserved shamanistic traditions against secularization during the Soviet era (Sidorova & Rice, 2020, p. 14); Georgi Derluguian has also written about the North Caucasus, and how the clan-based societies were established during the 19th century wars, and how the mountainous terrain was used as a base of resistance (Whittington, 2018, p. 21).

Daniel Treisman (Hughes, 2017, p. 147) has analyzed how civil war-era autonomies evolved into bargaining tools, which allowed some of Russia's regions to achieve fiscal independence, and has demonstrated how historical legacies have enabled regions such as Tatarstan to achieve fiscal independence. Ethnographic studies, including those of Dmitry Gorenburg (Gorenburg, 1999), have provided insight into cultural mobilization, and have shown how the Soviet-era deportation of certain ethnic groups has increased the solidarity and anti-central sentiments among the groups deported.

Economic perspectives, such as those of Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (Sunderland, 2017, p. 163), have demonstrated how historical distributions of natural resources, resulting from imperial conquests, have contributed to the development of crony capitalism in ethnic republics. However, there are gaps in the literature. Most of the literature concerning Russia's ethnic policy focuses on Slavic-centric narratives, and does not adequately represent indigenous Arctic groups that have experienced events such as the Civil War. Additionally, the interaction between climate change and historical landscapes, as discussed by Bruce Forbes, represents an additional modern layer that may impact sites of historical significance for indigenous Arctic groups such as the Nenets. Finally, comparative works such as that of Baogang He regarding Asian federalism have suggested that while Russia's event-driven ethnic policies may be adaptable to different circumstances due to its historical decentralizations, China's ethnic policies may be less adaptable than Russia's because they have historically been less decentralized.

Overall, this review combines the various strands of research, and positions this paper to make a contribution by analyzing both the event-specific aspects of ethnic policy making, and their spatial implications.

Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative and comparative-historical research method that uses comparative case studies of three areas in Russia to examine how certain key events shaped ethno-cultural dynamics over time. The selection of the areas was made based on the geographic variety and historical importance of the areas examined. This allows for comparison between the regions and provides insight into the ways in which geography can shape ethno-cultural development.

Sources used for the study included primary source materials (i.e. chronicled accounts of the Mongol invasion) and secondary analyses (books/journals) as well as Census Data from Rosstat (from 1913-2021) and ethnographic reports. The researcher identified specific events that have had a transformative effect on the regions studied; specifically, Mongol invasions contributed to the creation of new ethnic identities, expansion by Imperial powers contributed to territorial integration, the Russian Civil War led to fragmentation of ethnic groups within Russia, and post-Soviet and Soviet policies contributed to institutionalization of ethnic identity and redefinition of ethno-political action.

Historical Events and Their Impacts on Ethno-Cultural Landscapes

The Mongol Invasions (1237–1480)

Russian ethno-culture was drastically altered when Genghis Khan's descendants led the Mongols' invasion of Russia. The geographic openness of the vast Eurasian Steppes allowed for the Mongols' great mobility, and thus enabled them to conquer many areas, and create new societies that were created from the combination of Slavic agrarians with nomadic Turkic-Mongols. Many of these invasions resulted in mass population displacements, and the creation of ethnic enclaves, such as the Finno-Ugric peoples that fled the steppes and retreated into forests of northern Russia, where they maintained their native languages, including Mari, within the Horde's system of tributes (Hope, 2023).

There was an explosion of ethnicity due to intermarriage and migration resulting in the formation of the Crimean Tatars who have a unique blend of Mongol-Turkic-indigenous roots. In the Volga-Ural area, there were established Islamic cultural centers as well, specifically in the Kazan Khanate that was established after the invasion, and fought against Russian expansion until its fall in 1552. The way the Horde divided its territory into uluses (principality) provided precedent for later forms of ethnic autonomy, and influenced the boundaries of the Soviet federation (Khamidullin, 2025).

In terms of culture, the "yoke of the Tatars" in Russian historiography became the narrative of Slavic identity as a testament to Slavic strength, while among Tatars it is a symbol of the golden era of Tatar independence, and has become a driving force behind contemporary autonomy movements in Tatarstan. Isolated geographically, many of the Bashkir steppes continued to maintain nomadic traditions and resisted assimilation, and contributed to local movements demanding self-governance. Overall, the invasions embedded a long-lasting legacy of multi-ethnic living together, in which geography was able to mediate cultural syncretism (Burbank, 2023, p. 202).

Imperial Expansions and Caucasian Wars (16th–19th Centuries)

Geography shaped Russian Imperial territorial expansion, which was facilitated by colonization and Russification. The Volga River facilitated the movement of troops into eastern areas of Russia, enabling the incorporation of Tatar and Bashkir regions; while the vast expanse of Siberia created an environment suitable for settlement by fur traders who displaced or marginalized many indigenous populations such as the Yakuts (Golubchikov & Sevastyanov, 2022).

Massive violence during the Caucasian Wars (1817-1864) occurred in response to long-standing violent resistance to Russian expansion by the Circassians and Chechens in the mountainous regions of the Caucasus, with the resulting violent conflict establishing Sufi Islamic warrior traditions. Many of these conflicts included large-scale forced migrations such as the mass expulsion of Circassians in which hundreds of thousands were killed. These massive migrations resulted in diaspora communities in Turkey and other parts of Europe and Asia who maintained their traditional narratives and cultures. In Siberia, Cossacks established fortifications that provided the physical means of controlling space; however, the remote wilderness of Siberia (the taiga) continued to provide environments for the preservation of indigenous cultures, including that of the Evenks and their shamanic beliefs (Drozdova, 2021, p. 351).

As a result of Russian imperialism, urbanization occurred in many Russian cities due to the influx of migrants; however, at the same time, many rural peripheral regions remained isolated. Therefore, strong ethnic identities developed among many of the peoples that had resisted central authority. Today, many of the autonomous movements in regions of the former Soviet Union, such as Dagestan, are influenced by this history of resistance to centralized rule.

The Russian Civil War (1917–1922)

Russia's Civil War broke down the Russian Empire as many factions emerged to take over, including Bolsheviks, Whites, and various nationalities. The vastness of Russia was a resource used by all parties to further their goals and the geographically isolated North Caucasus allowed the mountainous regions to establish several independent "mountaineer republics," which were temporarily sovereign before being incorporated into the Soviet Union, leaving behind a legacy of separatism (Shcherbak, 2013, p. 9). Mobilization of ethnic identity during the war and the subsequent fragmentation of the state amplified ethnic diversity in the region. For example, the short-lived existence of the Idel-Ural State helped to galvanize Tatar identity and influence post-Soviet sovereignty parades. Similarly, Siberian indigenous groups aligned themselves differently to the new state, resulting in the establishment of the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, where the physical isolation from Moscow preserved traditional Buddhist practices (Sablin, 2016).

The chaos of the war led to korenizatsiya, which involved creating administrative institutions that represented ethnic groups, and establishing local languages as official languages. This led to the strengthening of ethnic identity and cultural identity; however it also created geographic based administration silos that would eventually become autonomous or self-governing demands.

Soviet Policies: Korenizatsiya and Forced Migrations (1920s–1950s)

Soviet ethnic policy formalized space (geography) through the creation of Autonomous Republics based on Civil War models to enable minority empowerment (Korenizatsiya) that led to the re-emergence of languages such as Tatarstan's; however, the geography of where those republics were located impacted the extent to which Korenizatsiya was implemented: Central Russia was subject to a process of "Russification" while peripheral republics such as Tuva maintained their autonomous status up until 1944 (Bowring, 2018, p. 4).

The forced migration of peoples from certain parts of the Soviet Union (such as the 1944 deportation of Chechens and Ingush), utilized the rail system of Siberia for relocation, ultimately resulting in the destruction of those communities that were displaced; this would have a lasting impact on the formation of ethnic solidarity among those who returned to their ancestral lands after World War II, contributing to the violence of the independence movements that took place in the early 1990s. The disruption to nomadic cultures that occurred due to the implementation of collective farms in the Arctic region of the Soviet Union, did however result in some cultural practices being preserved by virtue of the remote location of many of the indigenous people of the Arctic (Slezkine, 1995).

Ethnic policies implemented during the Soviet era created a double legacy of both institutionalized diversity and suppressed identities that would continue to influence the degree to which regional or national autonomy is granted within the post-Soviet states.

Post-Soviet Dissolution and Contemporary Legacies (1991–Present)

Following the 1991 collapse, there were several autonomy surges; The most notable was that of Chechnya declaring its independence, using stories of the civil war and the geographical features of the Caucasus to do so. To reflect the historical negotiating customs used by the Mongols (Malik, 2000), federal agreements such as that made by Tatarstan in 1994 were developed.

While recent events (such as the actions taken by Putin to centralize power) have largely suppressed autonomy movements, the geography of many remote regions has continued to provide a framework for underground resistance. Today, the intersection of climate change and history is occurring in ways which are reducing and ultimately destroying Siberian sites of cultural significance (Forbes, 2013, p. 5).

Discussion

History and geography have impacted each other on an ongoing basis to form Russia's diverse ethnic landscapes, to foster great amounts of regional (peripheral) ethnic diversity versus more central (core) assimilation. Nomadic Steppe warriors during the Mongol invasions formed a large-scale cultural blend with Slavic Agrarian communities, and displaced some groups (Finno-Ugrics) to their current forest habitats; thus, creating the Crimean Tatars, as well as Islamic centers along the Volga-Ural River. The process was very different than how Russian Imperialism expanded its control over territories through colonization, Russification, and violence (i.e., the Caucasian wars), when the Volga River helped the Russians move into the Tatar and Bashkir areas; the vast expanse of Siberia allowed for fur trade settlements to displace the native Yakut; and the mountainous terrain provided sufficient time for the Circassians and Chechens to resist before being forced out, resulting in massive dispersals of diaspora.

These geographic divisions were used again during the Russian Civil War to create temporary ethnic republics in the North Caucasus and to support movements such as the Idel-Ural State, which unified Tatar identity, while indigenous alliances in Siberia also supported the creation of Buddhist-based entities such as the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. This fragmentation led to the development of Soviet federalism, including the institution of korenizatsiya and its promotion of minority languages in autonomous republics, although these efforts were undermined by forced migrations (e.g. the 1944 deportation of the Chechens) and use of railroads to transport them to Siberia, ultimately strengthening ethnic solidarity among the nomads of the Arctic and other marginalized groups. Following the collapse of the USSR, the relationship between history and geography has continued, leading to varying levels of autonomy for different groups depending upon whether they reside in a geographically central or peripheral zone, with recent examples being the attempted secession of Chechnya and the 1994 treaty signed between Russia and Tatarstan. Centralization under Vladimir Putin has increased pressure on historically marginalized groups in peripheral zones to seek greater autonomy, even as climate change continues to threaten cultural heritage sites in the vast expanse of Siberia.

Given the long-standing relationship between history and geography, it is likely that there will be additional demands for greater autonomy in regions with high concentrations of resources (e.g., Tatarstan's oil fields, or the Yamal Peninsula tundra) that are physically distant from the central government, and that preserve their own unique cultures and histories, consistent with theories of separatism (e.g. Henry Hale) that focus on patronage politics and elite mobilization in peripheral regions with limited attention from central authorities.

Consequently, there may be a risk of destabilization in areas with unresolved historical grievances, especially if globalization creates additional pressures. In contrast, the dynamic nature of Russia's event-driven federalism could provide valuable insights for multi-ethnic states such as India.

Conclusion

Russia's ethno-cultural mosaic has been deeply influenced by many different historical events and geographic conditions that have created a pattern of diversity and autonomy in the various regions of Russia. The Mongols, for example, invaded Russia and established a "steppe" (a flat area near mountains) region of hybrid identities between Slavs and other groups. Later, during the Russian Empire era, the Russians conquered several Caucasus peoples and dispersed their diaspora populations throughout Russia. As a result, this created further patterns of diversity and autonomy. During the Russian Civil War, the empire fragmented and was later replaced by Soviet federalism, which encouraged "korenizatsiya" (the right to self-determination) and deportations, all of which contributed to an increase in ethnic resilience in distant periphery regions, while at the same time creating assimilationist tendencies in the core regions of Russia.

The complex interaction between history and geography demonstrates that topography (such as mountains, tundra, rivers, etc.) in addition to distance from the center has helped preserve culture in marginal resource rich regions and simultaneously strengthened regional separatism. These examples demonstrate that it is difficult for a central authority to maintain control of diverse multi-ethnic lands.

To create a unified federal government, policymakers need to recognize the legacy of history in each of the many regions of Russia and begin to take steps to resolve some of the grievances of those who feel ignored or excluded. Some possible strategies may be to revitalize or reformulate some of the original asymmetrical federalism agreements, invest in cultural preservation and resource management in regions such as Tatarstan or the Yamal Peninsula. In doing so, what could potentially become a source of conflict and instability can instead become a unifying force in Russian society.

Research on the future of the autonomous movements and identity claims in Russia will need to consider new forms of identity and narrative creation enabled by digital technology and virtual space. It is likely that digital platforms will allow

diaspora communities to restore their heritage, mobilize their identities online and challenge state-centrist histories, thus providing a new means for shaping discourse about autonomy that would not have been available in previous generations.

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Conflicts of interest

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