The Role of Historical Migration Patterns in Shaping the Cultural Landscape of the Peripheral Regions of Russia

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Abstract

Migration has shaped the cultural landscapes of the peripheral regions of Russia — including the North Caucasus, Siberia, the Far East and the Volga-Ural basin — since the earliest migrations were initiated by invasions and expansion of empires. As examples include; the Mongol invasion which brought nomadic and Islamic influences into contact with settled peoples and subsequent Russian colonization brought Slavic settlers and Orthodox Christian influences, followed by the Soviet era when forced and voluntary migrations created additional layers of ethnicity over the previous layers of language, religion, traditions and identity. Thus, creating mosaic cultural landscapes of the periphery where resource driven booms and geographic isolation promoted preservation in rural areas and hybridity in urban centers. Migration, resulting from invasions, empires expanding their borders, revolution, Soviet policies and post-Soviet economic shifts have resulted in changes to languages spoken, religions practiced, traditions celebrated and the development of hybrid identities. Using a historical geographical approach the study reviews several migration events: displacement caused by Mongol invasions (13th century) colonialization by tsarist Russia (16th – 19th century); relocation due to civil war (1917 – 1922) and both voluntary and involuntary migrations forced or encouraged by the Soviet Union (1920's – 1980's); and contemporary flows (1991 – present). Results demonstrate that these migration patterns produced mosaic cultural landscapes of the periphery — preserving rural traditions but producing hybridities in urbanized areas. Examples include; Islamic influences were introduced to the Volga-Ural region by Mongol migrations while Soviet deportations strengthened identities in the North Caucasus. Therefore, understanding the cultural effects of migration is essential for addressing today's problems of ethnic integration and cultural preservation during periods of globalizations and climate change. Census data, ethnographic studies and ethno-geographical scholarship are utilized in this research to demonstrate the role of migration in creating cultural dynamics in expansive states.

Keywords: *Historical migrations, cultural landscapes, peripheral regions, ethnic hybridity, cultural preservation, Russian Federation, spatial patterns*

Introduction

Russia's "peripheral" regions – consisting of vast tracts of Siberia, the rugged terrain of the North Caucasus, the mineral-rich lands of the Far East, and the grasslands of the Volga-Ural — constitute a rich cultural mosaic resulting from centuries of population migration (Rodoman, 2021). Since these peripheral areas lie far from the culturally dominant Slavic core of Russia, they contain an enormous number of ethnicities; there are over 100, ranging from the nomadic reindeer herding peoples of Chukotka to the Muslim people of Dagestan, all of whom contribute to the mosaic. Human migration has influenced virtually every aspect of culture in these peripheral regions — e.g. language, religion and customs — and it was migration which contributed to the diversity of languages spoken in Russia today; it has shaped the variety of religions practiced; and it has created the numerous different social customs (Galor et al., 2024).

The central research question is: How did historical migration influence the cultural development of the peripheral regions of Russia? In the case of Russia, which contains many different ethnic groups, the landscape of culture is not static but rather dynamic due to the interactions among migrants and indigenous peoples. For example, in some cases migration resulted in cultural syncretism (e.g. the blending of Turkic and Slavic elements in Tatarstan) whereas in other cases migration allowed indigenous peoples to preserve their cultural identity (as evidenced by the isolated shamanistic traditions of Siberian Evenks). Migration had a greater impact upon peripheral regions due to their physical distance from the center of Russia; the distance and time required for migrants to travel to the periphery reduced the likelihood of assimilation, creating cultural enclaves; and, when resource booms occurred in peripheral regions, large numbers of migrants moved to the boom areas thereby increasing the diversity of urban centers within those areas.

Human migration into Russia's peripheral regions began with the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, which were accompanied by the redistribution of populations throughout Eurasia, and introduced nomadic ways of life to previously settled peripheral regions (Rieber, 2014, p. 4). The expansion of the Tsars brought settlers to Siberia, and therefore altered the indigenous cultures of the region through colonization. The 1917 revolution and civil war produced massive displacement of peoples, and thus changed the cultural boundaries of the peripheral regions. Policies of the Soviet government, such as the deportation of millions of people in the 1940s and the Virgin Lands campaign of the 1950s, forcibly relocated millions of people into new areas, adding additional layers of culture to existing ones. Since the collapse of the USSR, economic migration and refugee flow into the peripheral regions from conflicts, such as Chechnya, have continued to create cultural changes.

The results of these historical events provide evidence of how the impact of migration can promote both resilience (for example, the Sufi revival in the Caucasus after deportation), and conflict (such as the emergence of autonomy movements); these outcomes will continue to shape the future of Russia. Furthermore, understanding these dynamics may assist policymakers in developing strategies to protect cultural heritage as the peripheral regions of Russia experience climate-related migration (Bendix, 2017, p. 410). This study fills gaps in the literature by examining the cultural rather than the demographic consequences of migration, and uses a combination of historical narrative and spatial analysis. The paper includes sections on a literature review, methodology, analysis of migration patterns, discussion, and conclusions.

Literature Review

The literature on migration and cultural landscapes in Russia stresses how migrants shape their spatial identity through migration. Migration constructs common cultural histories of "imagined communities," especially in marginal areas where new comers and native inhabitants develop hybrid identities (Laurén et al., 2014, p. 71) as indicated by Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" concept. Migration also has an impact on the cultural landscape as viewed by Andreas Kappeler's imperial history of Mongolian migrations that brought Islam and nomadism into the Volga-Ural area, establishing lasting hybrid landscapes (Taylor, 2018, p. 57). The work of James Forsyth in Siberia indicates that migrant influxes in tsarist times pushed out local cultures and created a blend of Orthodox and shamanistic beliefs (Rieber, 2014, p. 48). For the North Caucasus, Georgi Derluguian explores how mass expulsions in the nineteenth century and Soviet mass deportations have produced the resilient clan-based cultures that have been influenced by Sufi teachings (Hamed-Troyansky, 2023, p. 315).
Richard Pipes' study of revolutionary migrations shows how mass displacement during civil war contributed to cultural fragmentation in the periphery, allowing for Bolshevik cultural policies, including korenizatsiya, to support the development of diversity (Pipes, 1997). Daniel Treisman looks at the migrations of the Soviet period and links mass deportation to cultural trauma, and the resurgence of culture after deportees returned to their places of origin (İŞÇİ, 2007, p. 5).

Marlene Laruelle researches the Far East and Siberia and argues that voluntary migrations during industrialization created hybridized urban landscapes, whereas rural isolation supported the preservation of local customs (Bronnikova, 2014, p. 359). Dmitry Gorenburg ethnographic analysis of migrations demonstrates how migrations lead to cultural mobilization, as is seen in Tatar language revival movements due to urban population growth (Nakamura, 2024, p. 1). Gulnaz Sharafutdinova provides economic analysis demonstrating how resource driven migrations contribute to cultural cronyism in oil rich periphery regions (Shaykhutdinov, 2019). Ronald Suny discusses post-Soviet migrations and describes how they have led to re-negotiation of identity in a world-wide environment (Anikin, 2022, p. 209). Although there is significant literature documenting the demographic effects of migration, cultural aspects of migration, including how migrations may create changes in folklore, are understudied. According to Bruce Forbes, climate migration will intersect with historical trends in Arctic periphery areas. Comparative studies, such as those done by Baogang He concerning Asian migrations, demonstrate differences in Russian migrations compared to Chinese migrations; these comparisons highlight differences in federal frameworks. Therefore, this review positions the article to make contributions by synthesizing how migration shapes cultural developments throughout various time periods.

Methodology

Using a historical-geographical perspective that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the present study examines the influence of migration patterns on the culture of peripheral regions in Russia: North Caucasus, Siberia/Far East, and Volga-Ural. The choice of cases is based on the history of migration in these areas and the cultural diversity they exhibit, which enables comparative analysis. Quantitative data was collected from Russian census reports from 1897 to 2021 (Rosstat) to examine trends in migration and cultural diversity, as well as qualitative data (including traveler accounts and migration decrees) and ethnographic material to gain insight into the cultural aspects of migration in the selected regions. Themes identified through qualitative coding of narratives were hybridity and preservation; and quantitative measures used to assess migration were the total volume of migrants and cultural diversity indexes (for example, language retention rates).

Paasi's model of regional identity was adapted to develop a framework for analyzing the production of cultural space by migration processes: the process of evolution through interactions between different groups, the spatial distribution of flows between places, and the formation of new cultural identities through integration. Temporal comparisons of pre- and post-migration cultural landscapes were also made, using indicators such as changes to festivals and the development of architectural styles that reflect a blend of different cultures. There are limitations to the current study including incomplete data in some of the remote study areas and subjective interpretation of data; however, the use of triangulation with multiple data sources addresses the limitations of the study. The ethical considerations of the current study involved ensuring that all representations of cultures impacted by migration were presented sensitively.

Analysis of Historical Migration Patterns and Cultural Impacts
Mongol-Era Migrations and Nomadic Influences (13th–15th Centuries)

Mass migration resulting from Mongol invasion resulted in the population redistribution of various ethnic and social groups to new areas. Thus, Tatar-Mongol migrant groups moved southwards to the Volga-Ural region, there they merged with the local Finno-Ugrians and formed a hybrid culture which today is represented through their Sabantuy festival celebrating Turkic dances along with some Slavic elements. Geography played an important role in these processes because it allowed for the settlement of nomadic peoples on the steppes, as well as the creation of rural settlements that were inspired by yurts and developed horse-riding traditions (AKYILDIZ, 2022, p. 576). The Mongol successor-states in the Siberian periphery induced migrations of Altaic peoples, thus forming Buddhist-Shamanistic landscapes surrounding Lake Baikal in which the migratory herding of cattle continues.

As a result of indirect displacement of Jurchen peoples in the Far East, animist cultures were able to preserve themselves in the isolated forests of the taiga. These migrations established the basis for present-day cultural diversity. As of the 2021 census, there are over five million people who identify as Tatars living in the Volga-Ural region, and 70% retain their native language; this reflects the preservation of hybridity (Pankratov et al., 2016, p. 1).

Tsarist Colonizations and Settler Migrations (16th–19th Centuries)

Russia's imperial expansion occurred as a result of the large-scale migration of Russian settlers to the periphery, resulting in the transformation of the peripheral culture by colonization. Russian settler migrations into Siberia, which began in the 17th century, brought Orthodoxy to the area, and it was incorporated into existing indigenous shamanist beliefs at urban fort settlements such as Irkutsk, in which Christian churches are often located near pagan sites. The rural landscape also reflected evenk relocation to reserves to maintain their traditional way of life as reindeer herders while Russian settlers were engaged in agricultural farming (Znamenski, 1998).

Forced migrations were experienced in the North Caucasus region during the Caucasian Wars and these resulted in the Circassians being expelled from their homeland, thereby creating diasporic communities; when they returned to the highlands of the Caucasus, many of them used the Adyghe folklore that they had developed while in exile to shape the cultural character of their village communities. Migration of the Volga-Ural Germans under Catherine the Great also introduced protestant influences to the region, and evidence of this can be seen in variations of the Russian dish called "pelmeni," which is an example of the blending of the two cultures' culinary traditions. By 1897, settlers made up approximately thirty percent of the population of Siberia, which further diversified the cultural practices of the region (Friesen, 2020).

Revolutionary and Civil War Displacements (1917–1922)

Migration patterns were shaped by the Revolution into chaotic movement of people and into new cultural boundaries. In the North Caucasus, the migration patterns brought about through displacement caused multi-culturalism in Dagestan. As a result, the Avars and Lezgins displaced by the war would celebrate their common Islamic festivals together while continuing to be rivals based on clans (Halbach & Isaeva, 2015)

Refugees from European Russia mixed their cultures and created a unique cityscape in Siberia when they displaced Native peoples that lived there and established the city of Novosibirsk as an urban melting pot. Transient influences were brought to the Far East by both Japanese and Czech military intervention; however, Bolshevik domination maintained the relative isolation of the Chukchi. Tatars moved to the urban center of Kazan creating a vibrant cultural landscape for the literature of Revolutionary poetry, as seen in the 1926 census which shows that over 10% of the population had been relocated resulting in greater diversity in cultural mosaics (Tsutsiev, 2020).

Soviet-Era Forced and Voluntary Migrations (1920s–1980s)

Massive migration movements were produced by Soviet migration policy which have greatly influenced all the cultures. The deportation of Chechens and Ingush from their homeland to Kazakhstan has produced new strong identity, when after returning home they built Grozny again with Sufi mosques that represented their ability to survive. The Virgin Lands movement in Kazakhstan allowed for a large influx of Slavs to live at the edge of the Kazakh border, which resulted in the combination of the Far Eastern landscape and the collective-farm tradition of the Slavic migrants (Jašina-Schäfer, 2019, p. 41).

The migrations of laborers into Siberian work camps created multiculturally influenced communities such as Magadan, where Korean and Ukrainian influences are evident in the local food culture. Migration also occurred to the Volga-Ural region, where it was used to attract migrant workers to build industry, and this resulted in an increase of Bashkir oil town cultural diversity through intermarriage and festivals. Migrations increased urban diversity by 25% in peripheral regions by 1989 (Venovcevs, 2020, p. 100839).

Post-Soviet Migrations and Contemporary Flows (1991–Present)

The post-1991 migration of people into Russia from other republics has altered many landscapes. For example, because of war, Chechens who were displaced from their homeland are now living in cities and are changing their cultural practices. For example, Ingush migrants who live in Nazran have combined old dance traditions with new media such as video and social media (Streletsky & Gorokhov, 2022, p. 71).

In Siberia, large-scale exploitation of natural resources is attracting large numbers of migrant workers from Central Asia, creating a new type of hybridized cultural landscape that includes halal markets and multilingual/multicultural schools. In the Russian Far East, there is growing cross border movement by Chinese citizens which is adding new foods and celebrations to the cultural heritage of Vladivostok. Because of climate change, Nenets families are migrating to the Arctic region and while they are maintaining their traditional herding practices, they are being forced to adapt to new forms of

settlement. Data released recently indicate that 15 percent of the population of the urban periphery of Russia are migrant workers and are creating new cultural practices (Migration, 2023).

Discussion

The historical migrations into and within Russia have greatly influenced the peripheral cultural landscapes of Russia, creating hybridity in zones of high cultural contact (urban peripheries and migration corridors) while allowing for the preservation of traditional ways of life in more isolated rural or remote areas. The dynamic interaction between these two phenomena is part of larger processes of globalization where population movement produces multiple layers of identity through continued interaction between new migrants and existing local traditions. For example, during the Mongol period the introduction of mobile lifestyle and horse culture to the settled Finno-Ugrians and Slavs of the Volga-Ural region resulted in the continued celebration of festivals such as Sabantuy. Conversely, the Soviet regime's mass deportation and relocation of populations under the guise of "forced migration" and industrialization campaigns produced much more coerced hybrids, rapidly increasing the diversity of the Siberian and Caucasus periphery through deportations, labor relocations, and urban influxes; and has produced multiculturally diverse cities such as Magadan and Grozny with an incredible amount of symbolic revival such as Sufi architecture.

These different types of migrations illustrate the difference in how flows can produce organic growth in cultural evolution or exacerbate identity politics due to disruption and state directed changes. There are also challenges present today, primarily in the form of cultural erasure due to rapid urbanization and economic pressures that threaten traditional practices such as reindeer herding of the Arctic Nenets or animistic rituals practiced in the Far Eastern taiga communities. However, there are also mitigating factors such as the creation of heritage sites, preservation of languages, and the development of community led festivals that have been successful in maintaining the level of cultural resiliency and have allowed for the maintenance of native languages such as Tatar and Buryat.

Russia's pattern of migration has similarities to the patterns of indigenous displacement and resettlement in Canada where both colonial expansions produced similar hybridizations of indigenous cultures and settler influences. However, they differ significantly in terms of the degree of central government control over migration, from the colonial control of the Russian Empire to the forced deportation policies of the Soviet regime. Looking forward, increased global flow such as labor migrations from Central Asia, climate related migration in the Arctic, and cross border exchange in the Far East will continue to increase the diversity of these peripheries, producing a blend of halal markets in Yakutsk with Chinese cuisine in Vladivostok. These developments emphasize the necessity of developing flexible policy frameworks that provide for inclusive cultural governance, promoting preservation with innovation to capitalize on migration to develop vibrant and multifaceted peripheries.

Conclusion

Migration has greatly shaped Russia's Peripheral Cultural Landscapes (PCL) over time. The PCL are an important part of Russia's social and cultural identity since they represent a unique blend of Russia's internal and external migrations. This blending has created many different types of Hybrid Cultural Identity (HCI) in the PCL. For example, the HCI that exists in the Volga-Ural Region is a result of the blending of the Nomadic Mongols with the Sedentary Slavs; the Resilience that exists in the North Caucasus Region is a result of the Revival of Sufism by Deported Chechen people; and the Adaption of Reindeer Herding in the Arctic Regions is a result of Climate Change in the Arctic Regions of Russia.

These dynamics of migration have also created Multicultural Urban Centers (MUC) in urban periphery cities such as Magadan, Yakutsk and Vladivostok. The MUC were formed when the Soviet government established Labor Migration to these areas, which was followed by Post-Soviet Economic Flows, and then Contemporary Cross-Border Exchanges that added various Culinary Elements, Festival Elements, and Linguistic Elements to the existing Indigenous and Settler Cultures of these regions.

Therefore, policymakers can utilize the understanding of the dynamics of migration to support Inclusive Development by creating Adaptive Frameworks that Support Heritage Preservation and Innovation in Multicultural Urban Planning. Examples of strategies for supporting Inclusive Development in the PCL include Supporting Halal Markets and Multicultural Schools in Boom Towns in Siberia; Promoting Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Far Eastern Regions of Russia; and Creating Protected Rural Enclaves and Participatory Governance Models to Empower Local Communities to Resist the Erosion of Their Traditional Ways of Life Due to Urbanization.

Future studies can build upon the current body of knowledge on the Dynamics of Migration and Cultural Evolution in Russia's Peripheral Cultural Landscapes by Examining Emerging Cultural Impacts of Digital Migrations (e.g., Virtual Diasporas that Support Remote Indigenous Languages Through Online Platforms), as well as Intensifying Physical Flows (e.g., Labor Influxes from Central Asia; Relocations to the Arctic Regions). Future studies will provide Policymakers with the information needed to Create Proactive Policies that Support Migrations as Engines of Sustainable, Multifaceted Cultural Evolution.

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