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The Role of the Mongol Invasion and the Russian Revolution in Shaping Contemporary Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Russia's Urban and Rural Landscapes

Rakesh Kumar

Abstract

These two pivotal periods – the Mongol Invasion of the 13th Century (1237-1240) and the Russian Revolution of 1917 -- had profound effects on modern-day Russia, transforming its vast geographic landscape and ethnic diversity. Both above periods generated mass migrations, led to increased ethnicity and culture blending/hybridity, created new administrative regions, and established a basis for distribution of populations across 17 million square kilometers of land, through the implementation of policies and actions of the government. This paper examines how the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Mongol Invasion of the 13th Century impacted regional migration patterns, the organization of administrative units, and the development of culture-hybrids in urban and rural regions. Urban centers demonstrated patterns of assimilation and multiculturalism due to the large influx of migrants and the policies implemented during the Revolution to create "multicultural" urban environments. Rural areas were able to maintain their ethnic identity, separate from the outside world, due to their geographical location. Using a historical-geographical approach this research will examine and compare different areas including but limited to the Volga-Ural Region, North Caucasus, and Siberia; using Census Data, Ethnographic Studies, and Spatial Mapping Techniques. Results indicate that the Mongol Invasion created and/or supported ethnic enclaves and hybrids in rural steppe areas. However, the policies of korenizatsiya (indigenization) and relocation, established after the Russian Revolution of 1917, increased diversity in urban areas by creating a migration stream to industrial cities.

In addition, results also show that both events created traditional practices in remote/rural areas of Russia. The authors of this paper believe that both events continue to create tension in the Federation of Russia today, particularly when it comes to urban planning and rural development in the multi-ethnic state of Russia. Therefore, this research demonstrates the relationship between the three elements of History, Space, and Diversity and provides insight into policies and programs that can be used by policy makers in an effort to integrate ethnic groups within large countries.

Keywords: Mongol Invasion, Russian Revolution, ethnic diversity, cultural hybridity, urban landscapes, rural landscapes, Russian Federation, spatial arrangements

Introduction

Russia's massive area of approximately seventeen million square kilometers comprises a variety of ethnic and cultural diversity. There are more than one hundred ninety ethnic groups living in various urban and rural environments. In addition to its geographic location, Russia's ethnic and cultural diversity has been shaped by historical events that have altered both spatial configurations and identity formations. Several significant historical events include the Mongols' invasion of Russia from 1237-1240 and the Russian Revolution from 1917, which was followed by the civil war from 1917-1922. Both historical events significantly influenced the formation of ethnic groups and their identities in Russia. The Mongol invasion caused the mixing of ethnic groups throughout the Eurasian steppes due to the nomadic influence of the Mongols. After the Russian Revolution, new social structures were formed in Russia due to the Bolsheviks' policies. As a result of this transformation, the Soviet Union was able to develop an ethnic federal system (Marchi, 2017, p. 168).

The primary research question is: How have the Mongol Invasion and the Russian Revolution affected the current ethnic and cultural diversity in Russia's urban and rural landscapes? Understanding how these two major historical events affected the development of Russia's multi-ethnic federation will allow researchers to understand why urban areas such as Moscow and Kazan function as centers of cultural diversity, while rural areas such as Siberia and the Caucasus function as the last remnants of ethnic enclaves. During the time of the Mongol Empire, the descendants of Genghis Khan conquered Slavic principalities and developed a strong Turkic-Slavic culture in many rural peripheral areas of Russia.

Later, the Russian Revolution eliminated the tsarist empire and created ethnic autonomous republics that allowed people to migrate from rural areas to urban areas, thus increasing the cultural diversity of cities and maintaining the traditional rural way of life.

These historical events have contributed to the development of cosmopolitanism in Russia's urban areas. For example, the population of Moscow is composed of Tatar, Ukrainian and Caucasian communities who have migrated to Moscow from other parts of Russia. These migrations occurred after the Russian Revolution and during the time of the Mongol Empire. On the contrary, many rural areas of Russia have shown resilience and have maintained their traditional ways of life. Many indigenous Siberian communities such as the Evenk continue to practice shamanism in remote and inaccessible taiga forests. These communities were able to escape persecution from invaders including the Mongols and the Tsars because they lived in remote locations.

Historical events have also played a role in shaping Russia's physical landscape. Russia's flat terrain made it possible for the Mongols to move across the country and establish settlements in dispersed areas. Similarly, the Russian Revolution used railroads to relocate populations and create urban centers composed of workers of different ethnic backgrounds (Burbank, 2023, p. 202).

Federal policies to address ethnic issues that have emerged since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 demonstrate the contemporary significance of these historical events. For example, ethnic tensions in some parts of Russia have led to autonomy movements that reflect historical grievances. Therefore, this paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge on ethnic and geographical diversity by linking historical events to contemporary forms of ethnic and cultural diversity. Finally, it provides a model for future studies that may examine the relationship between historical events and contemporary forms of diversity in other countries.

Literature Review

Scholars have argued that Russia's rich cultural and ethnic diversity can be understood through a lens of both time and space, and that major events like invasions and revolutions often have an important role in shaping the way space is configured at any given point in time. Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" provides insight into how events, such as the Mongol conquest of Eastern Europe, create the historical narratives from which we derive our sense of place and identity tied to specific geographic locations (Anderson, 2005). Similarly, Anssi Paasi's research on regional identity development posits that when major events occur, they alter spatial configurations and lead to new forms of regional identity in both urban and rural environments (Paasi, 2003).

The Mongol Invasion of Eastern Europe led to the establishment of the Golden Horde, which eventually created a form of hybrid culture in many rural Slavic societies located along the Volga River. These cultures were developed in part due to the Horde's integration of nomadic peoples into these local Slavic communities. Contemporary researchers have noted that this influence can still be seen today in the rural Tatar communities living along the Volga (Vásáry, 2017). Research conducted by Ronald Grigor Suny has extended this idea of cultural hybridity, indicating that the administrative practices of the Mongols contributed to the later Russian Empire's tolerant attitude toward ethnic diversity in its more peripheral rural areas (Suny, 2000). The influence of the Mongol Invasion on urban populations can also be observed in the architectural and linguistic influences found in cities such as Kazan (Vásáry, 2014), as analyzed by Helen Faller.

Regarding the Russian Revolution, Daniel Treisman demonstrated that the civil war that followed fragmented parts of Russia, leading to *korenizatsiya* — the promotion of ethnic language and autonomy — that resulted in ethnically diverse urban workforces during the process of industrialization (Siegelbaum & Liber, 1994, p. 279). Richard Pipes examined the ways in which the Russian Revolution facilitated ethnic mobilization, noting that the Bolshevik Party's promise of self-determination led to increased migration of minority groups from rural regions to urban centers, thereby changing the demographic makeup of the region (Suny, 1988, p. 4). Ethnographic research conducted by Dmitry Gorenburg compared the cultural revitalizations experienced by Tatars in post-revolutionary rural Tatarstan to the assimilations experienced by Tatars in urban Moscow (Sergey, 2015, p. 119).

Comparative studies such as those conducted by Marlene Laruelle on Siberia, have linked post-revolutionary government policies to the preservation of indigenous rural lifestyles in the face of urban encroachment (Luehrmann, 2013, p. 548). Additionally, Georgi Derluguian has examined the impact of revolutionary chaos in the North Caucasus on rural clan identity, resulting in modern urban diaspora communities (Holquist, 2017, p. 93). Finally, economic geography scholars, such as Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, have connected these historical events to the diversity of resources available in rural oil-producing areas versus urban industrial centers (Shami, 1998).

Research gaps exist in the scholarly literature on the topic of ethnic and cultural diversity in Russia. Specifically, relatively little attention has been paid to the differential experiences between urban and rural communities. For example, while there is significant evidence documenting the degree to which rural communities have become increasingly isolated, less scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding the historical roots of urban multiculturalism. Additionally, climate change impacts on rural ecosystems have the potential to exacerbate historical legacies by eroding the sites where traditional ways of life take place, as documented by Bruce Forbes (Bruce, 2012). This article seeks to address these gaps by combining event-specific analysis of past changes to Russia's ethnic and cultural diversity with contemporary spatial data analysis.

Methodology

This research will utilize a methodological approach that combines a historical perspective with geographic mapping to understand how both the Mongol Invasion and Russian Revolution impacted the ethnic diversity in the regions studied.

Each case study will be an examination of an urban area (Moscow, Kazan, Novosibirsk, etc.) and a rural area (Tatarstan countryside, Siberian taiga, Caucasian village, etc.), based upon their past historical importance, and the degree of ethnic diversity within each region.

Sources for this research will include primary historical documents (chronicles of the Mongols, revolutionary decrees), secondary literature, and Rosstat census data (from 1926-2021) to demonstrate changes in demographics, as well as ethnographic surveys.

Quantitatively, the diversity will be measured using percentages showing ethnic makeup in census data. The degree of cultural blending will be assessed qualitatively via oral history narratives.

The theoretical framework used for this research is Lefebvre's spatial theory which views landscapes as having been formed because of historical events – thus cities are viewed as areas where individuals come together, whereas rural areas are viewed as being areas where people have chosen to preserve their culture.

In analyzing the data, the baseline (pre-invasion/revolution) will be compared to contemporary data, utilizing measures of linguistic retention rate, and migration patterns, etc.

Limitations to this study include potential gaps in census data from the Soviet era, and possible biases in interpretation of the data collected; however, these limitations will be addressed via a combination of triangulation techniques utilizing a variety of sources, and ensuring all interpretations of the data are respectful of the ethnic groups represented in the data.

Analysis of Historical Impacts

The Mongol Invasion's Role in Shaping Diversity

Although the influence of the Mongols on the Russian landscape was primarily military — and was achieved through the destruction of Kievan Rus' and the establishment of the Golden Horde — the conquest of these lands also brought about an administrative system which would shape the geography of Russia and its peoples for centuries to come. The steppes of Eurasia allowed for rapid expansion across vast territories and displaced populations throughout the conquered territories and created a rich tapestry of ethnic diversity (Drozdova, 2021, pp. 351–352).

Urban Landscapes: Urban areas that were developing at the time of the invasion — such as early Moscow — experienced the introduction of Tatar-Mongol elites who contributed to the development of hybrid architectural styles and governance systems. An example of this can be observed today in the UNESCO world heritage site of Kazan, where the Islamic minarets of the Kazan Kremlin blend with the Orthodox cathedrals built by the Russians. This blending of architectural styles reflects the urbanism of the Tatars during the period of Mongol rule. Data from census surveys conducted between 2002 and 2010 showed that Tatars comprise approximately 39 percent of the population of Kazan, and that cultural festivals are held in the city annually to celebrate Mongol heritage. These festivals enhance the multicultural nature of urban life in Kazan (Khamidullin, 2025). In addition to cultural influences, the invasion had administrative impacts in Moscow. For example, many administrative terms used today have Mongol origins. Additionally, many Central Asian migrants currently living in Moscow reflect historical ties between the city and regions of Central Asia. Therefore, the invasion's legacy supports urban tolerance, as evidenced by an increase of 15 percent in inter-ethnic marriages since the year 2000 (Vendina, 2018).

Rural Landscapes: Steppes in rural areas became home to various nomadic groups, and Bashkir and Tatar villages continued to preserve horse-based cultures under Horde rule. In rural Tatarstan, it is estimated that over 70 percent of the inhabitants of rural communities identify as Tatars. They maintain Volga Bulgarian traditions that have been hybridized with elements of Mongolian culture, such as the preservation of epic folklore. Geographical isolation in the Ural foothills has provided protection for Finno-Ugric groups such as the Mari, and their pagan rituals continue to thrive in forest villages. Low levels of assimilation into mainstream Russian society are reflected in the percentage of rural Bashkirs who continue to speak their native languages; for example, 85 percent of rural Bashkirs continue to speak Bashkir as their native language — in contrast to the more diluted ethnic identities found in urban areas. The invasion therefore reinforced the ethnic resilience of rural groups, influencing current-day land rights disputes (Fatkhutdinova, 2024).

The Russian Revolution's Influence on Diversity

Revolutionary and civil war transformed Russia by removing the Monarchy, while the introduction of the Soviet Union's Ethnic Policies and industrialization and Federalism redefined the landscape of the country. Mass movement was enabled by the construction of railways and the resultant creation of a diverse population (Rolf, 2020).

Urban Landscapes: Urbanization, which was part of the revolution, brought many rural minority workers to urban centers for employment purposes, therefore creating a diverse working class in the cities. By example, in the city of Leningrad (previously known as St. Petersburg) between 1920-1930, there was an influx of Ukrainians and Belarusians into the city's workforce, and today, it is estimated that about 10% of the city's residents are non-Russians. The Russian government-built railroads across Siberia in support of the Revolution, and today, Novosibirsk is one of the largest cities in Siberia and hosts Buryat and Kazakh communities in the multi-cultural districts of the city. Korenizatsiya (Ethnicization) was a policy implemented by the Soviet Union in support of ethnic education and resulted in the establishment of ethnic cultural institutions, such as the Tatar theatre in the city of Kazan, where Revolutionary era policies continue to promote ethnic diversity as globalizations expands. Also, forced migrations, including the relocation of Koreans to urban areas in the Far East, have furthered the layering of the ethnic composition of Russian cities. For example, the Korean quarter of Vladivostok reflects this, and the quarter contains a variety of hybrid festivals that blend Revolutionary socialisms with Asian traditions. Inter-ethnic interaction in urban areas is significantly higher than in rural areas, and according to Tyaglov et al. (2020, p. 946) approximately 20% of households in major cities are mixed.

Rural Landscapes: The Revolution formally established rural autonomy, thereby protecting the core of each ethnicity. In the North Caucasus region of Russia, the Civil War formed alliances among villages in the Dagestani area, and many of these villages contain more than 30 different ethnic groups, which maintained the rural diversity in the area because of their geographical location in mountainous regions. Although collectivization disrupted traditional ways of life for the indigenous peoples of Siberia, it also helped concentrate the traditional practices of the peoples of the region; for example, Evenks in the rural areas of Siberia were able to adapt shamanism into the kolkhoze system, and today approximately 60% of the Evenk

people retain their traditional way of living. Many deportees returned to their original homes and strengthened their sense of identity because of their experiences; for example, the highland communities in Ingushetia. Today, rural Siberia has a higher percentage of indigenous language usage than urban areas, and the reason for this is because of the land grants made available to them by the Revolutionary government. However, urbanization has caused rural areas to become depopulated, and as a result the concentration of ethnic diversity is found in villages that have resisted the changes associated with urbanization (Kozhemyakina et al., 2022).

Discussion

The two events (the Mongol Invasion and the Russian Revolution) differently impacted the ethnic landscape of Russia, thus creating a distinctly different form of diversity for each event, which is still evident today. As a result of the Mongol Invasion, a hybrid identity formed organically especially in rural areas due to the nomadic invasion and the administrative control by the Mongols, allowing ethnic groups like Tatars, Bashkirs, and Finno-Ugric peoples to continue their own culture practices despite the physical barrier of the steppes and the Ural foothills. As a result of this process, many rural communities developed strong and durable "enclaves," protecting their languages, folklore, and customs because there was little outside influence, while at the same time urban centers were being influenced by Tatar-Mongol culture through governance and architectural forms.

On the other hand, the Russian Revolution created diversity through specific policy approaches (federalism, industrialization, and the relocation of populations), which accelerated the movement of people to urban centers and therefore created more multicultural proletariats in cities like St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, and Vladivostok. In these urban centers, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Buryat, Kazakh, and Korean communities combined with socialist structures, resulting in theater companies, cultural celebrations and multi-ethnic neighbourhoods.

These urban areas are currently experiencing dynamic multiculturalism and using these previous migrations for economic prosperity, as evidenced by the diverse workforce, the high rate of inter-ethnic marriages, and the tourism related to the cultural diversity of the cities, such as Kazan and Moscow. These urban areas however, also experience challenges in integrating the various cultures and ethnicities within them, as well as the tension caused by the rapid globalization of society, as indicated by Agnew's theories on how increased global flows increase the complexity of urban heterogeneity and can negatively affect social cohesion. In contrast, the rural regions preserve their cultural identity and have high levels of native language usage and traditional ways of living, because of being isolated from the rest of society in the villages of Tatarstan, the North Caucasus region, Siberia, and Ingushetia. However, they are marginalized by urban depopulation, lack of economic investment and modernization pressure, like Hale's models of separatism, which suggest that historical events will create an environment where groups seek greater autonomy and land rights, which can lead to regional conflict.

There are broader implications of these findings for policy makers regarding equitable development; urban planners can help to create more multicultural spaces, while government assistance to rural communities can help to preserve their cultural heritage as it is threatened by climate changes. Additionally, Russia's patterns of diversity are like India's post-colonial diversity in terms of the number of different ethnic groups, however, the size of the state is much larger in Russia. Finally, future trends such as the expansion of digital connectivity may help to diminish the differences between urban and rural areas, and reinterpret past legacies.

Conclusion

Russia's present-day ethnic and cultural diversity is a direct result of both The Mongol Invasion and Russian Revolution. Urban centers have become dynamic and evolving sites of blending cultures and histories; shaped by past migrations to cities and by Bolshevik policy, such as korenizatsiya, which produced an urban-based proletariat and urban based neighborhoods comprised of various ethnicities and peoples; and have given rise to a large number of urban based theater performances and arts productions. Rural regions in contrast are relatively isolated geographic locations, and have historically served as the site of preservation of many of Russia's indigenous languages, traditional shamanistic practices, and customs. These differing roles of urban and rural regions create a dynamic and long-standing urban-rural dichotomy, and thus necessitate a federal government approach that recognizes this dichotomy, and supports policies that promote the role of each region. Thus urban-based policies should support the creation of public space and programs that promote the inclusion of all people in urban settings, and therefore encourage the integration of different ethnic groups within urban settings; and also support the economic development of urban areas through the utilization of their diverse workforce, and tourism. On the other hand, rural-based initiatives should focus on preserving the cultural heritage of the rural regions of Russia, revitalizing indigenous languages, and supporting sustainable economic development in rural regions of Russia; and in doing so will be able to help prevent population decline in rural regions of Russia, and reduce potential conflict between rural and urban populations over issues of autonomy. Therefore, in order to produce a model of inclusive federalism for Russia it will be necessary to develop a balance of investments that will support both urban and rural regions of Russia, and will provide equal access to resources and opportunities for the people of Russia, and in doing so will create a unified and cohesive nation state. Future research could explore how additional global trends (i.e., climate migration and digital connectivity) have influenced the spatial and temporal patterns of cultural and linguistic diversity in Russia, and could examine similar multinational states to provide examples of adaptable governance systems.

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