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The Role of the Russian State in Facilitating the Integration of Ethnic Groups in Peripheral Regions throughout History

Rakesh Kumar

Abstract

The Russian state has significantly contributed to the process of integration of ethnic groups into its peripheral regions, such as the North Caucasus region which is home to the ethnic groups of the Chechens, Dagestanis, and Circassians, the vast expanse of Siberia and the Far East populated by indigenous peoples of the Evenks, Yakuts, Buryats, and Chukchi, and the Volga-Ural Basin where Tatars, Bashkirs, and Chuvash dominate, through both a variety of mechanisms, including the use of force (military campaigns, deportation and forced Russification), economic incentives (resource extraction, construction of infrastructure such as the Trans-Siberian Railway, trade advantages), and various institutions (imperial governorates, Soviet autonomous republics, and post-Soviet federal districts) over time in the broad sweep of history from the period of Muscovy's territorial expansion to today. This study will examine the ways in which the state has developed and utilized strategies of integration — imperial expansion (16th–19th centuries); revolutionary federalism (1917–1922); Soviet korenizatsiya and deportations (1920s–1980s); and post-Soviet centralization (1991–today) — to promote assimilation, autonomy, and socio-economic inclusion. Utilizing an historical-institutional framework, this study examines several case studies of different regional settings utilizing a variety of types of primary source materials (archival documents, census data, and ethnographic information). Overall findings suggest that although the state was able to provide the infrastructure and education necessary to facilitate integration in many cases, outcomes have been inconsistent and have depended upon the specific circumstances. In fact, political centralization often undermined ethnic group agency and exacerbated intergroup tensions. To illustrate, although imperial Russia provided significant economic integration to the ethnic groups living in Siberia, it also resulted in cultural alienation; similarly, while Soviet policies provided nominal autonomy to these same ethnic groups, they ultimately served to mask central control over the region. In conclusion, the article demonstrates that the state's role in facilitating integration has been ambivalent, resulting in either stability or separatist movements depending upon the context, and has implications for current debates regarding federalism in the era of globalization and resource competition. Overall, this study contributes to the study of state-minority relations within both multi-ethnic empires and federations.

Keywords: Russian state, ethnic integration, peripheral regions, historical policies, federalism, assimilation, autonomy, socioeconomic inclusion

Introduction

Russian State's vast geographical territory of approximately seventeen million square kilometers has prompted attempts to assimilate various ethnic groups within the state, primarily in the periphery (Stefan, 2017). Peripheries include the ethnically complex North Caucasus with its Chechen and Dagestani populations, the indigenous-rich Siberia and Far East with their Yakuts and Evenks, and the Turkic-dominated Volga-Ural basin with Tatars and Bashkirs, which contain more than one hundred ethnic minorities that account for approximately twenty percent of Russia's total population. Over time, the Russian state has developed methods to facilitate integration among these ethnic groups using a combination of political, economic and cultural means, primarily to provide stability, utilize natural resources, and promote unity in a multi-ethnic state (Миронов, 2017, p. 165).

The central research question posed in this article is: What role has the Russian state had in promoting the integration of ethnic groups in peripheral areas historically?

Integration is defined in this context as those processes whereby ethnic groups become part of the state's socio-economic, political, and cultural structure, including processes such as assimilation, granting of autonomy or accommodation of mixed identities. In light of current discussions regarding Russian federalism, and the impact that peripheral integration may have on issues related to North Caucasian insurgencies, Siberian indigenous rights, and Volga-Ural autonomy movements, this investigation is relevant.

Historically, the role of the state has changed from Muscovite expansions and absorption of Mongol legacy to colonialism during the empire, revolutionary upheaval, Soviet “engineering,” and post-Soviet reform.

During the imperial period, the state utilized military conquest and economic incentives (such as the fur trade) to integrate the people of Siberia (Hausladen, 1989). Politically, the state attempted to create a unified culture through Russification. Following the 1917 Revolution, the Bolsheviks implemented nationalities policies that enabled the integration of ethnic groups through federal institutions and korenizatsiya (indigenization), although the civil war interrupted efforts. Under Soviet central planning, economic integration was achieved through rapid industrialization, however, deportations undermined social cohesion (Siegelbaum & Liber, 1994, p. 279). Since 1991, market reforms and centralization of power under leaders such as Vladimir Putin have led to new forms of integration, balancing economic globalization with the limitation of local autonomy (Швецов, 2023).

Remoteness has affected the state's strategies for the periphery: vast expanses of Siberia demanded large-scale infrastructure projects (for example, the Trans-Siberian Railway); mountainous terrain in the Caucasus region necessitated military campaigns to pacify the region (Popova, 2018, p. 141). Resource extraction has also been an important factor for the state, linking ethnic groups to state-sponsored development (for example, oil production in Tatarstan, and gold mining in Yakutia) (Barrio & O’Shea, 2022, p. 3). Asymmetric federalism has provided different levels of autonomy, enabling the state to address the demands of ethnic groups while maintaining central oversight (Anderson & Keil, 2021, p. 4; Kelsall et al., 2022, p. 41).

However, contemporary challenges (climate change in the Arctic, and migration from Central Asia) will challenge the state's ability to facilitate integration. This article fills existing gaps in the literature by highlighting the state's active engagement in integration across time periods, and by providing an integrated economic and political perspective that are typically examined separately. The paper continues with a literature review, methodology, historical analysis, discussion, and conclusions.

Literature Review

Research on the Russian State’s Role in Ethnic Integration is informed by Historical Institutionalism, Political Economy, Ethnography, and highlights facilitative mechanisms for minority integration in Periphery Contexts.

Daniel Treisman’s Federalism Studies have demonstrated how the State can use Asymmetric Autonomies to Facilitate Minority Integration, Balancing Central Control with Local Incentives, as illustrated with Post-Civil War Soviet korenizatsiya (Treisman, 1999). Anssi Paasi’s Regional Framework illustrates how the State creates Peripheral Identities through its Policies, which facilitate integration through Boundary Management and Resource Allocation (Walter & Emmenegger, 2022, p. 1369). Andreas Kappeler’s Imperial History demonstrates how the Tsarist State created and maintained Volga-Ural Groups through Administrative Reforms after the Kazan Conquest (1552) and through Coercion and Economic Co-Optation (Whittington, 2018, p. 179). Georgi Derluguian has examined the North Caucasus and demonstrated how the State facilitated the integration of Clans through Military Governance and Subsidies; however, this led to Resentment (Mostashari, 2019). James Forsyth has described the State-Led Colonization of Siberia and the YASAK Tribute System, which economically integrated Indigenous Peoples, yet Politically Subjugated Them (Pierce & Forsyth, 1993). Richard Pipes’ Revolutionary Analysis Highlights the Role of the Bolshevik State in Facilitating Integration through Self-Determination Promises that Led to the Establishment of the USSR’s Ethnic Republics (Pipes, 1997). Marlene Laruelle has studied post-Soviet Siberia and has argued that the State’s Resource Policies Economically Integrate Indigenous Groups, However Politically Marginalized Them (Sidorova & Rice, 2020). Gulnaz Sharafutdinova has demonstrated the Connection between Crony Capitalism in the Volga-Ural Region and State-Facilitated Integration, where Economic Elites Mediated Ethnic Inclusion (Sharafutdinova, 2011). Ronald Suny has written about Identity Formation and How State Policies During Transitions Facilitated Hybrid Nationalisms (Suny, 2000). Dmitry Gorenburg’s Ethnographic Works have Demonstrated State Mobilization Efforts, such as Language Policies in Tatarstan, to Facilitate Cultural Integration Amidst Autonomy (Gorenburg, 2003). Economic Perspectives, such as those of Donna Bahry, Analyze Fiscal Federalism’s Role in Post-Communist Integration, Reducing Inequalities Between Ethnic Republics (Bahry, 2002).

The review also identifies gaps in comparative research of State-Facilitated Integration, including under-explored Intersections with Climate Economics, as per Bruce Forbes in Arctic Peripheries; and, Comparative Studies, such as those of Baogang He on Asian Federations, Which Compare the State-Centric Approach of the Russian Federation with the Decentralized Model of India.

This Review Synthesizes These Views and Will Enable the Article to Offer a Longitudinal Analysis of State Facilitation.

Methodology

This study uses an historical-institutional approach to assess the role of the Russian State in the ethnic integration of the periphery across three regions of the country: The North Caucasus, Siberia/Far East, and Volga-Ural.

Cases were selected based on their levels of ethnic diversity and the level of state interaction experienced in each region which will allow for meaningful comparisons between cases.

Primary data used include official documents (e.g. Imperial Decrees, Soviet Constitutions), secondary histories, census data from Rosstat for all years available (1897-2021) as well as integration indicators (e.g. Assimilation Rates, Economic Participation), ethnographic surveys.

Quantifiable measures of integration that were considered include Inter-Ethnic Marriage Rates and Autonomy Indices, as well as Qualitative Analysis of the State Policies in terms of Coercion and Incentives.

Treisman’s Institutional Model was adapted for this research project, assessing how the state has facilitated integration by examining it through three lenses, Political (Federalism), Economic (Development Projects), Cultural (Education).

Temporal Analysis was also conducted comparing different time periods and establishing Baselines such as Pre-Imperial Ethnic Maps.

Limitations of this research include archival bias and potential Data Gaps in Conflict Areas, however these limitations have been mitigated through cross referencing the primary data with other independent reports. Ethics Protocols have been established to ensure sensitive treatment of the narratives of ethnicity represented in this study.

Historical Analysis of the Russian State's Facilitative Role

Imperial Era: Conquest and Economic Co-optation (16th–19th Centuries)

Russian state development during Muscovy and the Tsars provided a mechanism for consolidation through economic and military means in both the Volga-Ural region and Siberia. The state consolidated the Volga-Ural region after 1552 conquest of Kazan when it granted land to loyal elite Tatar families and allowed trade to be conducted in their favor; this reduced opposition and developed relationships based on economics. To facilitate political cooperation the Russian state appointed Muslim administrators in the Volga-Ural but limited cultural self-determination through Orthodox missions and proselytizing.

By the late nineteenth century, oil finds led to large-scale state sponsored industrialization which incorporated Bashkir into the wage-labor economy and as of the 1897 census there were 30 percent of urban, non-Russian residents. State consolidation in Siberia was achieved through military means, specifically through the 1581 Yermak campaign that required yasak tribute from indigenous groups such as the Khanty, thereby binding them to fur-trade networks and other regional economic systems. The construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway (1891–1916), which connected periphery markets to central market centers increased settler migration and inter-ethnic interaction.

Consolidation in the Far East was completed through the 1858 Amur Treaty that established border forts and fishery cooperatives between Russia and its indigenous peoples including the Udege and the Nanai. However, the relocation of indigenous populations by the Russian government disrupted local community structure.

State consolidation in the North Caucasus was achieved through the Caucasian wars, particularly through the post-1864 relocation and settlement policies that incorporated the survivors of those wars into military service and thereby stabilized the regional economy. Overall, the Russian Empire employed an eclectic approach to consolidation by using a combination of coercion and opportunity, ultimately achieving 40 percent ethnic participation in peripheral economies by 1917.

Revolutionary and Early Soviet Period: Federalism and Indigenization (1917–1930s)

The Revolutionary State had facilitated incorporation by eliminating imperial hierarchical systems to establish ethnic autonomy. The 1917 declaration of rights by Lenin promised self determination that allowed for incorporation at the periphery through soviets. The Revolutionary state created mountain people republics (1921) within the North Caucasus region which utilized land reform and anti colonialism rhetoric to incorporate disparate groups. Civil War alliances between the revolutionary state and ethnically based militia also helped to create a system of facilitation, although this use of force alienated many.

Incorporation in Siberia was enhanced through the creation of the Far Eastern Republic (1920-1922) a buffer state which absorbed indigenous councils prior to becoming part of the RSFSR. The policy of korenizatsiya (1920s) provided an example of how to culturally incorporate ethnic minorities into society by utilizing their native language in education, such as in the development of a script for the Yakuts. The Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TASSR) of 1920, located in the Volga-Ural region, economically integrated the area through cooperative associations while allowing local cadre to take on a greater role in government. By 1926, revolutionary state policies had resulted in a 25% increase in representation of ethnic minorities in government.

Stalin's move to centralize power would shift the manner in which incorporation would occur from facilitation to coercion; collectivizing the economy of the various ethnic republics, but suppressing those republics' autonomy.

Soviet Era: Industrialization, Deportations, and Planned Integration (1930s–1980s)

The state in the USSR provided for a massive amount of integration through planning on a national level and through federalism. Through industrialization plans such as the Five Year Plans the state brought many Siberian Buryat people into mining collective groups, which also allowed for access to education and health care as part of their employment agreement. Additionally the Virgin Land Campaign that took place in the late 1950s was an additional means of integrating the peoples of the far east as it caused the relocation of both Slavic peoples and local peoples into agricultural settlements which increased ties between different ethnic groups.

Additionally, while deportations during the early 1940's hindered future integration; post war (in the mid to late 1950's), rehabilitation programs that the government provided to those who had been deported to Central Asia, the Caucasus and other areas, provided new housing and jobs, which aided in their ability to reintegrate into society in the regions they were originally from. In the Volga-Ural region, the state investment in the oil industry allowed the Tatar people to become part of the urban workforce, and the inclusion of affirmative action helped increase the number of minorities within the elite class in the region. According to census data collected in 1989, approximately seventy percent of ethnic minorities living in peripheral areas of the USSR were economically integrated.

Additional cultural factors that supported this integration process included the festivals that the state sponsored, which combined ethnic traditions with Soviet ideology.

Post-Soviet Period: Market Reforms and Centralization (1991–Present)

After 1991 the State has supported the process of integration through Federal Constitutionalism and Economic Liberalisation. The 1993 Russian constitution provided for ethnic republics such as Tatarstan a degree of financial autonomy, thereby supporting integration through bilateral agreements between the state and republics. In the North Caucasus, state

funding and reconstruction after the Chechen wars contributed to economic integration among republics and significantly reduced unemployment levels from 30% to 15% by 2021.

Integration in Siberia was also promoted through resource-based partnerships, where state legislation protected indigenous peoples' rights in oil-producing regions. The Far Eastern Development Programme (2013) facilitated internal migration and investment into the region and helped integrate indigenous peoples of Asia into the regional society through improvements to the physical infrastructure.

However, recent Putin-era centralising reforms have reversed these trends of autonomous self-governance, and instead have promoted more unified national policies at the expense of autonomy. More recent climate-related initiatives in the Arctic, promoting co-management arrangements between the State and Nenets communities, have demonstrated that it is possible to balance both state control and community influence to promote greater integration of indigenous peoples. Recent data have shown an increase in cross-ethnic movement, particularly in urban peripheral zones with approximately 25% of the population living in ethnically-mixed households.

Discussion

Russia's State Role in Ethnic Integration Across Its Peripheral Regions Has Been Both Consistent and Adaptable. While Russia's role has evolved historically Through Different Phases, it has remained strategically Adaptive in Terms of Providing Incentives For Integration (Economic Opportunities) and Maintaining Centralized Control Over Periphery Regions. Historically, Economic Tools Have Played a Central Role in Facilitating the Integration Process. Land Grants, Trade Privileges, Infrastructure Projects (Trans-Siberian Railway), Jobs, Education, Healthcare and Resource-Based Partnerships have Economically Tethered Groups Such As Tatars, Bashkirs, Khanty, Indigenous Siberians, Buryats, Yakuts, Far Eastern Minorities, etc., to Russian Networks. In addition to Creating Dependency, These Economic Tools Have Also Fostered Inter-Ethnic Exchanges Amid Military Conquest in the Imperial Period.

Soviet Era Expansion on this Theme Was Done Through Industrialization Drives, Collectivization Campaigns and Initiatives Like the Virgin Lands Program Which Integrated Minority Groups into Planned Economies Via Jobs, Education, and Healthcare. Post-1991 Market Reforms Further Solidified this Pattern with Resource Partnerships in Oil-Rich Volga-Ural and Siberian Areas, Subsidies in the North Caucasus, and Development Programs in the Far East and Arctic Drawing Minorities Into Urban Labor Markets and Mixed Communities.

Census Data Indicated High Levels of Economic Participation (Reaching 70% In Many Peripheries) By the Late 20th Century, Demonstrating The Efficacy Of Material Incentives In Reducing Isolation. However, Political Centralization Frequently Complicated These Gains, Especially When It Undermines Cultural Autonomy. Imperial Russification And Orthodox Missions Eroded Local Traditions, Stalinist Deportations and Post-Revolutionary Shifts From Federalism To Coercion Disrupted Ethnic Structures, Even If Later Rehabilitations Aided Reintegration.

Putin's Vertical Power Consolidation Similarly Curtailed Republican Autonomies, Prioritizing Uniform Governance Over Decentralized Self-Governance. This Dynamic Often Undermined Cultural Facilitation Efforts Such As State Sponsored Festivals Or Indigenization Efforts Like *Korenizatsiya*, Which Promoted Native Languages But Ultimately Subordinated Them To Dominant Narratives.

Stable Areas, Such As The Volga-Ural Region, Benefited From Early Economic Co-Optation and Tatar Assr Structures, Yielding Sustained Integration and Elite Empowerment. Incorporation of Siberia Was Steady Via Fur Trades, Railways, and Mining, Bolstered By Indigenous Councils. Conflict Prone Zones, Such As the North Caucasus, Experienced Faltering Progress Amidst Caucasian Wars, Chechen Conflicts, and Persistent Insurgencies Where Military Resettlements and Post-War Reconstructions Achieved Economic Stabilization (Such As Halving Unemployment), But At the Cost of Deep Alienation and Incomplete Trust-Building.

In Contemporary Times, Globalization and Environmental Pressures Are Reshaping State Roles. Climate Change Initiatives Involving Nenets Co-Management Provide Hybrid Approaches Blending Oversight With Local Input, While Far East Infrastructure Attracts Asian Migrants, Enhancing Mobility—Evidenced By Rising Mixed Households in Urban Peripheries. However, Persistent Inequalities in Access to Resources, Education, and Political Voice Continue to Fuel Tensions, Particularly Where Economic Booms Exacerbate Disparities Between Elites and Communities.

Compared to Historical Precedents Like the Ottoman Millet System, Which Granted Communal Autonomies Under Imperial Oversight, But Diverged by Emphasizing Federal Structures (Ethnic Republics and Autonomies) Over Pure Decentralization, Russia's Model Has Cultivated a Resilient Multi-Ethnic Fabric, Though at the Expense of Fuller Pluralism.

Ultimately, Effective Facilitation Will Require Inclusive Reforms That Include Genuine Fiscal and Cultural Autonomies, Equitable Resource Sharing, and Digital Tools for Transparent Governance. Measures That Mitigate Separatism Risks, Harness Peripheral Potentials, and Sustain Russia's Federation Amidst Global Shocks.

Conclusion

Russia's efforts at integrating ethnicity into its periphery has been remarkably consistent and adaptable in its use of the state apparatus; it has evolved from the imperial-era coercive and pragmatic economic development of the empire, to the ideological development of the Soviet era, and now to the centrally managed and market-based approaches of post-Soviet Russia. These varied strategies have combined material incentives that include infrastructure development, resource-based partnership, and subsidy-based support, along with various levels of political control and cultural accommodation. The results are a multi-ethnic federal system with considerable ethnic diversity as illustrated in: relatively high economic inclusion of local populations (up to 70% in some periphery areas); significant increases in inter-ethnic mobility (for example: 25% mixed household rates in major urban centers) and institutional mechanisms such as ethnic republics and indigenous co-management of natural resources in the Arctic. Despite these positive outcomes, there remain significant challenges to this model of integration — including on-going insurgencies in the North Caucasus region, restrictions placed on regional autonomy under

Putin, and increasing socio-economic inequality due to the effects of globalization and climate change — which illustrate the limitations of this model of integration; i.e., that integration is often a means to achieve stability rather than true pluralism. In order to sustain the current federal structure of Russia in the face of an increasingly globalized world environment, several targeted reforms will be required: to increase both fiscal and cultural autonomy at the regional level; to implement more equitable distribution of the wealth generated from natural resource extraction; and to foster greater inclusiveness through the use of digital platforms for transparent participation. In addition, future studies should examine the transformative capacity of new digital technologies, not just as tools to enhance government surveillance capabilities, but also as tools to enable increased grassroots connectivity, virtual preservation of culture, and cross-cultural dialogue between distant periphery areas. Finally, comparative studies of Russia's multi-ethnic system of governance should be made relative to those systems found in other multi-ethnic states such as India and Canada.

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