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The Russian Melting Pot

By Diane Chido
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For centuries, the term “melting pot” has been used to describe the United States of America as a nation of multiple nationalities. But the phrase may not be America’s alone to use. Consider Russia, both past and present.

Although the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to 14 of the country’s 15 generally-ethnically based union republics being removed from Moscow’s control, Russia remains the largest country in the world by land mass and is home to some 190 ethnic groups.

To understand the importance of recognizing Russia as a “melting pot,” and what it means to geopolitical forces today, it is first worthwhile to briefly revisit Russian history for context. Then, we might consider the implications for today.

The Birth of the Modern Russian State

The year 862 CE is often considered the birth date of the modern Russian state. Until that time, there were a collection of Eastern Slavic city-states, not unlike those in Italy, of varying wealth and influence, that frequently fought with each other. In that year, the Varangians, a mainly Swedish Viking group, established the state of Rus’ in the territory called Muscovy, essentially today’s Moscow established around the Moskva River.

Twenty years later, Prince Oleg of Novgorod conquered Kyiv, incorporating it into Rus’, marking the next historically significant milestone. It is important to note that this consolidation took place along with the growth of Viking influence,

whose various factions alternatively raided, traded, and settled in these regions and beyond.

Like the consolidation of the newly independent American colonies uniting under the Articles of Confederation soon after the war for independence to create a unified force against further incursion by Britain and France, the Russian princes, who desired independence, also recognized that unity would be a more effective bulwark against the Norsemen. This consolidation process among Slavic princes continued in the face of 300 years of Mongol rule beginning in 1240 with the sacking of Kyiv. This Mongol influence is often cited as a key reason that Russia developed so differently politically and culturally from Western Europe. Russian geography with thousands of miles of vast, unforested grasslands, like the U.S.'s Great Plains, also made it difficult to repel invaders from the East.

From this time, the Slavic princes endeavored to return to self-rule under a kingdom centered on the Grand Duchy of Moscow. In 1547, Ivan the Terrible transformed the Duchy into the Tsardom of Russia, modeling himself after the Roman Caesars. But his lack of an heir threw things into chaos called "The Time of Troubles."

Eventually, in 1613 Michael Romanov was the first of this dynasty crowned Tsar. The line continued until the murder of Tsar Nicolai Romanov during the communist revolution in 1917.

In between, familiar names highlight the points of greatest expansion: Peter the Great, who proclaimed the Russian Empire in 1721; Catherine the Great, who, following in Peter's efforts to westernize Russia, encouraged some Enlightenment-inspired ideas and brought the nation into the modern era; and, Tsar Alexander I (Catherine's grandson), who led Russia in defeating an advance by Napoleon, which led to the country becoming one of the great European powers.

As Russia expanded from a small duchy into a great empire, it grew into a vast nation with 11 time zones and spanning five climate zones described by *Britannica* ranging from "Arctic desert, tundra, taiga, mixed and deciduous forest, wooded steppe, and steppe."^[1] Russia also dominated myriad peoples whose cultures and livelihoods varied with their physical environment.

Immediately following the Russian Revolution, Vladimir Lenin intended to organize the country into autonomous republics with the right of secession based on major ethnicity. The union republics roughly corresponded to the 15 major ethnic groups as shown on the first map including the Russian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian (today Belarusian), and Moldavian (today Moldovan), the last three in the west; the Baltics: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania; in the Caucasus:

Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia; in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. (All 15 became independent nations with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.)



Map of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Within the Russian Republic, Lenin intended to establish autonomous non-Russian ethnic republics ostensibly with the right of secession and self-determination to win them over to the Bolshevik side in the Civil War that raged until 1921. These were titular nation-states, but as people migrated over the centuries, not all of the names matched the primary ethnic grouping within every republic. The actual autonomy and number of these ethnic republics ebbed and flowed over the decades of Soviet rule, but by the 1980s, the clamoring of many of the republics for real independence grew.

While Russian history is undoubtedly fascinating, the point of today's essay is to very briefly describe these peoples that make up today's Russia. The carving away of 14 of the 15 generally-ethnically based union republics upon the dismantling of the Soviet Union did significantly reduce both the country's size and its diversity. Yet, today's Russia remains the largest country by land mass and is still quite ethnically diverse despite a great majority of the country's inhabitants being Russian.

The great majority – just over 80% – of these peoples are Russians. The other 20% break down roughly into six broad categories: Turkic (Azeris, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmen, Uzbeks and others); peoples of the Caucasus

(Abkhazians, Armenians, and Georgians, as well as Chechens, Daghestanis, and others); Uralic peoples (ethnic and linguistic Finns and Estonians, who have settled in various places in northwestern Russia and around the Baltic Sea); and other Slavs (mainly Ukrainians and Belarusians).

Understanding Russia's 'Melting Pot' Today

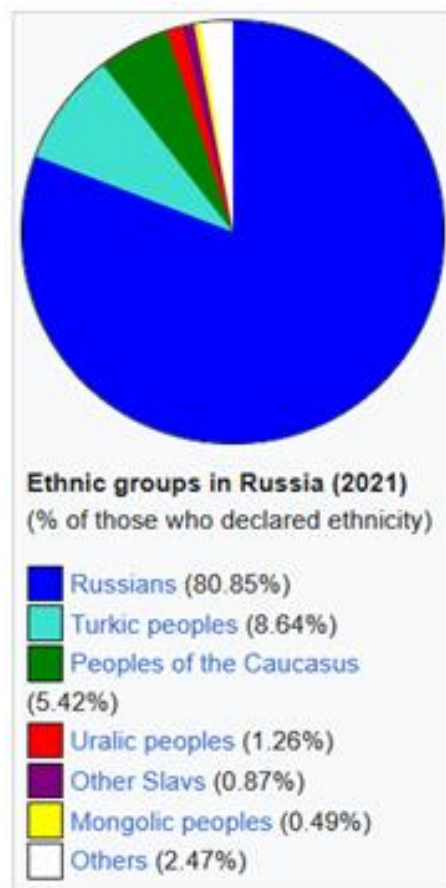


Chart of major ethnic population distribution

There are also those called Mongolic, who would be descendants of the Mongols and largely inhabit neighboring Mongolia today. Mongolians divide into about two dozen clans, which are largely culturally and linguistically heterogeneous. Mongolic peoples are genetically related to Eastern Chinese peoples including Uighurs.

The first map shows the concentration of Russians across this vast landmass.^[ii] The deeper the green, the more Russians are represented. Note the two large tan areas toward the northeast, where the population is about 50% Russian.

Percentage of Ethnic Russians
in Russia (by region)

- 95-100%
- 90-94%
- 80-89%
- 70-79%
- 60-69%
- 50-59%
- 40-49%
- 30-39%
- 20-29%
- 6-19%
- 0-5%



Map showing concentration of ethnic Russians by region

The second map indicates the geographic population concentrations of non-Russians across the country, beginning with Ukrainians and ending with Udmurts.[iii]

Second largest ethnic groups
in Russia

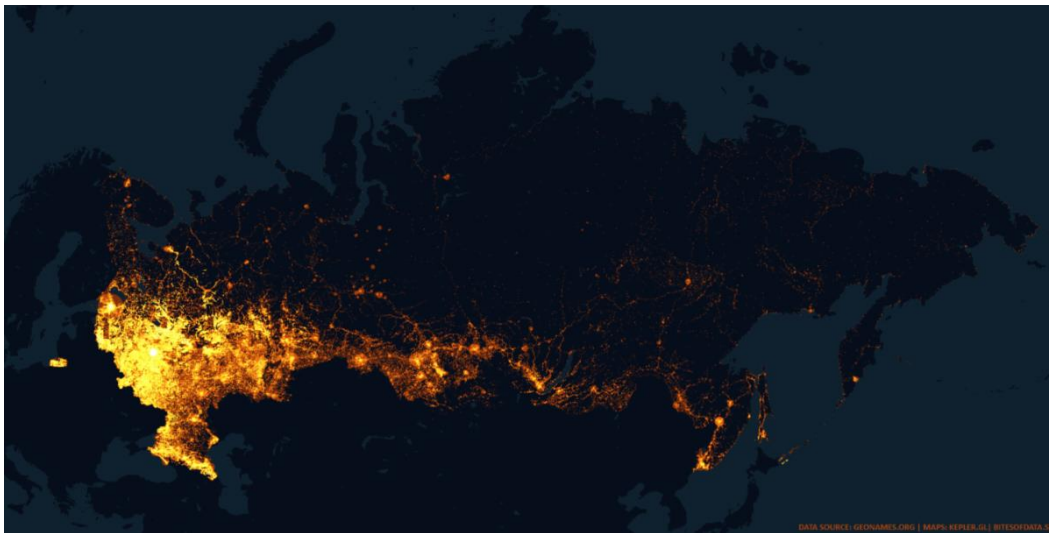
- Ukrainians
- Tatars
- Russians
- Buryats
- Kazakhs
- Armenians
- Georgians
- Adyghes
- Altai
- Bashkirs
- Chechens
- Chukchi
- Dargins
- Karelians
- Khakass
- Koreans
- Mari
- Mordvins
- Nenets
- Udmurts



Map of Russia indicating the second largest ethnic group in each

Despite these maps showing ethnic population dispersion, the third map shows the total population density, which is about 150 million.[iv] Two thirds of Russian

citizens live in the southern and especially southwestern parts of the country. The huge dark area with few people is mainly forest, which covers about 50% of the country's total land. For comparison, before World War I, roughly 20% of Americans lived on the 80% of the land that was then rural. By the end of World War II, roughly 80% of Americans lived on just 20% of the land in growing cities. Since the 1960s, due to forced urbanization and the common contemporary desire of young people to live in cities, Russia has urbanized at a rapid rate, leaving tens of thousands of villages abandoned. Russia also has notoriously poor transportation infrastructure, despite the country's enormity, it has fewer miles of road than the U.S., China, India, and Brazil, which creates huge supply chain inefficiencies and keeps people clustered in cities.[v]



Russian geographic population density

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed the Federation Treaty in 1992 under which 86 constituent entities and three “cities of federal importance” including Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Sevastopol on the Black Sea united in a federal system of limited autonomy. Under this system, citizens of the individual entities, typically called republics as a shorthand, would elect their own governors, providing some independence in hopes they would not try to further splinter Russia. This is why Russia is today officially called the Russian Federation.

Too Large to Govern Federally?

By the mid-1990s, there were discussions and predictions in policy circles that Russia was simply too large to exist as a single country and that individual republics with economic ties and affinities would likely form regional entities and separate entirely from Russia to become new countries. At that time, I

attended a press conference in Washington, D.C. in my capacity as research assistant in the Russia Division of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). There, Aleksandr Filipenko, the governor of Khanty-Mansi, which produced 51% of the oil in Russia, asserted that his republic provided vast revenues to the central government and got little support and services in return and thus might decide to withhold their oil if nothing changed. The governor changed his tune and eventually followed the beat of Putin's drum.

Conversely, leadership at the national level has pointed to in-fighting among the republics as cause to have a strong national government. Case in point, in September 2004, separatists in Chechnya attacked a school in neighboring Beslan, South Ossetia, There, the people were celebrating the first day of school with students in their new uniforms bringing bouquets of flowers for their teachers. The separatists attack ultimately left some 330 people, mostly children, died.

Many observers speculate that the attack was anticipated by Russian Interior Ministry intelligence but had not been stopped so that Russian President Vladimir Putin could make the point that the republics were poorly governed and lawless.

Three months later, on December 12, Russia's Constitution Day, Putin abolished the electoral process for republic governors and appointed those who would be loyal to Putin and his government. That included Filipenko, who despite his earlier complaints, remained in the governor's seat until 2010. Thus, Putin managed to reassert control all the way to Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean.

What Does It Mean to be 'Russian'?

When we speak of "Russia," or "Russians," this is somewhat misleading. Russians are the majority population in the Russian Federation, but they are not a monolithic force – nor do the millions of other members of ethnic groups contained in Russia's melting pot always hold the same views on domestic and international events.

Although western policy analysts worried incessantly about what a new Russian culture would look like, Putin recognized what the Yeltsin administration missed: after the collapse of Soviet communism, a new ideology would be needed to bind people together once the old practices, customs, and slogans no longer held sway. He developed a new Russian nationalism based on the old Empire-era symbols of God, Tsar, and Family. He also promoted the Russian Orthodox Church as a unifying symbol, dusting it off and polishing it up after decades of oppression in the Soviet period, giving it prominence of place, along with the military, in national celebrations.

This unifying symbolism doesn't work for everyone in Russia, however, as many people who grew up in a secular country or young people with online access to other ideologies mix with Buddhists, Muslims, and other Christian groups that don't see the appeal of the strict Orthodox faith.

As can be the case in any multicultural country, these differences can be actively promoted to sow the seeds of disunity – similar to what Russia has been accused of in promoting election interference in the U.S. and Europe for the past decade.

This is to caution: Russia's own multiculturalism could also be weaponized by an adversary. At an October 2022 U.S. Army Civil Affairs Association meeting at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, a man attempted to recruit me in the dinner buffet line for my knowledge of Russian culture to work with Válka-Mir, LLC., a company ostensibly producing “advanced social science R&D for non-lethal conflict intervention.”^[vi] Válka-Mir's website cover image does not look especially peaceful, as the Russian word “mir” means.



Cover image from Válka-Mir website

Of course, learning that I did not have a Ph.D., he rescinded his offer, but not before he explained that their organization was working with U.S. Special Forces to map and infiltrate indigenous non-Russian ethnic groups to identify cultural and political traits and perceptions that could be manipulated to engage in insurgency operations to destabilize Russia and topple Putin. If this project is effective, Russia's melting pot could be nudged into a boiling cauldron of opposition.

[i] “Climate of Russia,” *Britannica*, available [here](#), accessed on December 13, 2023

[ii] “21 Maps that explain Russia,” *Vivdmaps.com* available [here](#), accessed on December 13, 2023

[iii] “21 Maps that explain Russia,” *Vivdmaps.com* available [here](#), accessed on December 13, 2023

[iv] “21 Maps that explain Russia,” *Vivdmaps.com* available [here](#), accessed on December 13, 2023

[v] "Country Comparisons: Roadways," The World Factbook, CIA available [here](#), accessed on December 14, 2023

[vi] Valka-Mir LLC website accessible [here](#), accessed on December 13, 2023

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.



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