Conflict, Migration, And Demography In Russia And Its Border Regions

John P. Ruehl – Source: Independent Media Institute

06-07-2023 ~ *For centuries, Russian authorities have modified their approach to managing the country's large, diverse population, held together by an ethnic Russian core. The war in Ukraine has again altered the Kremlin's strategy of managing its complex domestic demographics.*

Despite the absence of a clear definition of "ethnic group," the term generally refers to people with a common history, culture, and ancestry. Russians are widely considered the largest ethnic group in Europe, and historically they have lived in a multiethnic state where they formed a majority of the population. Within the country's vast territory, imperial Russia and later Soviet authorities often encouraged internal migration to help populate barren regions for economic exploitation, typically resulting in cooperation and assimilation between ethnic and social groups.

But cultural fusion has not always been possible nor desired, and conflicts and forced population transfers have occurred both internally and in Russia's border regions for centuries. Since the Soviet collapse, the Kremlin has attempted to

enforce a sense of patriotism among its diverse citizenry by synthesizing Russia's ethnic and national identities, while weakening the links between the two in other post-Soviet states.

Early Russia to Tsardom

The Russian identity begins with the Slavs, a diverse collection of tribal societies with common linguistic, religious, and other cultural ties who settled across Eastern and southeast Europe in the 5th Century AD. The first Slavic-majority state was the Kievan Rus, declared in 882 and centered around Kyiv. Its Viking and Finnic minorities steadily Slavicized through intermarriage and cultural assimilation, and the Rus adopted Orthodox Christianity from the neighboring Byzantine Empire in 988. But the Slavic-majority state soon became weakened by internal political divisions and in 1240 was destroyed by the expanding Mongol Empire. This left Moscow, a small city on the Rus' periphery, subservient to the Mongol yoke.

After the Grand Duchy of Moscow, or Muscovy, was established in 1263, the young Russian state, defined largely by its Eastern Slavic and Orthodox heritage, expanded across its sparsely populated territories in the west and north over the next two and a half centuries. It steadily absorbed other Slavic and Orthodox communities, as well as several others, into the developing Russian identity.

By the 15th century, expansion into what is now southern Russia and Ukraine brought the Duchy into significant contact with Cossacks. Typically a mix of runaway serfs, hunters, bandits, mercenaries, and fugitives from Eastern Europe, Cossacks lived in militarized yet lightly organized settlements across border regions in Russia's south and east. Their diverse ethnic origins and semi-nomadic societies prevented Cossack groups from developing a strong national identity. Many, however, belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church and spoke "in dialects of Russian."

Following the establishment of the Tsardom of Russia under Ivan the Terrible in 1533, Cossack groups became essential to wider Russian military campaigns against regional Tatar groups. While Tatar origins are often debated, they have generally been portrayed as descendants of Turkic nomadic tribes who invaded Eurasia with the Mongol Empire and remained there after the empire dissolved in 1368.

The Russian state also sought to reunify what it saw as "Russian lands," namely the Orthodox and Eastern Slavic populations in modern-day Belarus and Ukraine, including the Cossacks living in these lands. In 1654, Russia signed the Pereiaslav Agreement, facilitating the absorption of parts of eastern Ukraine, and in 1686 it gained additional former territories of the Kievan Rus. Education, intermarriage, and government service also instigated the "Russification" of Ukrainian nobility. However, there was significant tension between the relatively autonomous Cossacks and the organized states that sought their assistance and incorporation, including Russia. Cossack groups launched several rebellions against Russia in the 1600s and 1700s, which often spurred Russian serfs and other minority groups to join. Cossack military campaigns against Russia, sometimes in coordination with other states, were also common.

But Russian authorities could offer Cossacks something other states could not—an open frontier. In return for military service, Cossacks enjoyed vastly reduced taxes, freedom of movement, and significant autonomy. Cossack groups steadily helped conquer smaller, often warring Finnic, Turkic, Ugric, and Tatar tribes across Siberia and into Alaska, establishing many settlements that later became major cities. Russian expansion was often brutal, but agreements with local elites permitted conquered communities to retain elements of their culture and assimilate into the empire by accepting Tsarist rule. Russians and Cossacks would also adapt to local cultures, and intermarriage between groups was common.

Russian Empire

Following the establishment of the Russian Empire in 1721, Cossack groups steadily became integrated into Russian military command and proved integral to Russian campaigns to expel local Muslim populations to Russia's south and west. Between 1784 and 1790, 300,000 Crimean Tatars (out of a population of roughly 1 million) left or were forced to leave the peninsula. Hundreds of thousands of Circassians also left or were forced to leave the mountainous Caucasus region in the 1800s.

In both instances, most displaced Muslims settled in the nearby Ottoman Empire, paving the way for Russian settlers to move in. Yet population transfers in primarily Muslim lands were not universally carried out. In the Caucasus, Russian authorities created alliances with some local communities between the 16th and 18th centuries, who were wary of Ottoman and Persian influences in the region. Russian authorities also sought to use the empire's Muslim minorities to expand

into other Muslim regions. Tatar communities who accepted Tsarist rule, for example, were used as cultural emissaries in Central Asia, building relationships with the local populations as the Russian Empire spread further into this region in the 1700s and 1800s. Additionally, many "noble Russian families were of Tatar descent and there was frequent intermarriage between the Russians and Tatars."

Lacking the population to hold territory as Russia's empire continued to expand, Catherine the Great's second manifesto in 1763 invited European settlers to Russia. Without requiring citizenship and enticed by tax breaks, loans, land grants, and religious freedom, hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Germany, the Balkans, and other parts of Europe moved to the sprawling empire and its new territories over the next few decades, often maintaining their distinct cultures.

However, the rise of nationalism in Europe in the 1800s began to threaten the loose national identity that Russian authorities had nurtured for centuries. Following the emancipation of Russian serfs in 1861, integration problems also arose as the Russian government began giving land only to citizens and began to more forcefully promote Russification. This included introducing conscription and other obligations for non-Russians, expanding the use of the Russian language among ethnic groups, and identifying "potential Russians" in the European part of the empire. Violence against the Jewish population meant that roughly 2 million Jews also left the empire between 1881 and 1914. But because the Russian Empire required a larger population to sustain industrialization and its enormous territory, a net migration of 4.5 million people arrived in Russia from 1860 to 1917. Immigration and territorial expansion meanwhile meant that ethnic Russians went from roughly 77 percent of the population at the time of the establishment of the Russian Empire to roughly 44 percent at the time of the 1897 census.

In addition, Russification policies caused tension with some minority communities and were one of the major causes of the Russian Revolution in 1905. Ethnic violence among minority groups also broke out across the empire, such as the Armenian-Tatar massacres from 1905 to 1907.

World Wars and the Soviet Union

Ethnic tensions persisted even after Russia became embroiled in World War I in

1914. Disputes between Russian authorities and local populations in Central Asia, including over the unfair distribution of land to Russians and Ukrainians, conscription in the Russian army, and other issues, resulted in the 1916 Central Asian Revolt. Thousands of Slavic settlers were killed, while reprisal attacks, famine, and disease saw 100,000 to 270,000 deaths of mostly Kazakhs and Kyrgyz afterward. Ethnic tensions persisted throughout the empire, and many countries and ethnic groups declared their independence from Russia after the Russian Revolution in 1917. The ensuing Russian civil war saw the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), or Soviet Union, in 1922. Though Soviet forces were able to recapture much of the Russian Empire's territories by the early 1920s, Finland, the Baltic states, and Poland gained their independence, while resistance to Soviet rule continued throughout the 1920s in Central Asia.

After consolidating power, Soviet authorities kickstarted a more calculated and ruthless management of the country's sprawling, multiethnic society. Smaller clan and region-based identities were homogenized in accordance with Soviet nation-building policies, and "by the end of the 1920s people who had not really thought in national terms before the World War [I] found that they now had a national language, a national culture, national histories and national political structures—in short, they had become members of a nation." Internal borders were established based on ethnic identity under a policy known as national delimitation, followed by Korenizatsiya, or "indigenization," where minority nations and populations were given significant autonomy as well as power in the national government.

Eventually, 15 major Soviet republics emerged. The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), the largest, was further divided into autonomous ethnic minority territories. Both inside the RSFSR and the Soviet Union, Russian cultural dominance was reduced considerably. However, in the 1930s, Soviet political leader Joseph Stalin reversed much of this process to harness Russian nationalism and consolidate power against separatist-inclined republics and regions. While the specter of "Great Russian chauvinism" was carefully repressed in the Soviet Union until its collapse, power began to be recentralized in Moscow and the "petty bourgeois nationalism" of smaller ethnic groups was also curtailed.

Beginning in the 1930s, Stalin also began large-scale forced population transfers of entire ethnic groups, which continued during World War II. Mass rail transit systems allowed Soviet authorities to deport more than 3 million people between

1936 and 1952 belonging to 20 social and ethnic groups. Several were largely removed from their "ancestral homelands," including the Volga Germans, Kalmyks, Karachai, Balkars, Crimean Tatars, and Meskhetians. And whether true or not, many minority groups—among them Chechens, Ingush, and Cossacks—were accused of working with Nazi Germany during the war. Like others, they were sent to Siberia and Central Asia to labor camps or "special settlements," where hundreds of thousands perished.

Slavic migration to Central Asia also increased during WWII, as populations sought to avoid the encroaching German army. Additionally, the redistribution of industrial capacity to Central Asia during WWII, as well as urbanization, further changed the ethnic layout of the Soviet Union.

Stalin's death in 1953 largely ended massive, forced population transfers, and most groups were able to return to their ancestral homelands over the next few years. But Soviet authorities maintained the Stalin-era borders to divide and weaken ethnic groups. By avoiding the creation of homogenous republics, they could more easily suppress separatism and compel ethnic groups to require the assistance of the Kremlin to manage their territorial disputes. Soviet authorities also sought to continue redistributing the labor force, and in the years following WWII until the mid-1970s, 2.7 million Russians left the RSFSR to Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic states, and Central Asia. However, by the 1970s this trend reversed, and 2.5 million Soviet citizens flocked to the RSFSR from 1975 to 1991.

While Russians (and their culture) enjoyed a privileged position of "first among equals" in the Soviet Union, overt Russification policies were mostly abandoned in favor of "Sovietization," which instead promoted a non-ethnic national identity. By the 1960s, Soviet sociologists advocated for the existence of a Soviet people "with a shared identity based on common territory, state, economic system, culture, and the goal of building communism." Yet despite a rise in interethnic marriages, traditional ethnic and cultural ties, as well as grievances, proved difficult to dislodge. Tied by a common east Slavic and Orthodox heritage, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians dominated the Soviet Union's political structures. Ethnic solidarity could also affect foreign policy—Central Asian soldiers, for example, were initially used during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, but due to fraternization with local Afghans, were largely replaced by Slavic troops in 1980.

The synchronization of Russian cultural identity with that of the Soviet one meant Soviet culture steadily lost its appeal among the non-Russian population, while many Russians also grew disenfranchised by the 1980s. And by 1989, the ethnic Russian majority of the Soviet Union had fallen to roughly 51 percent. Growing avenues for ethnic nationalism among minority groups as a result of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, as well as ethnic Russian frustration with these policies, played an essential role in the Soviet collapse in 1991.

Russian Federation

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, the 15 republics became independent countries. Millions of ethnic Russians returned to the Russian Federation in the 1990s from across the former Soviet Union, in addition to non-Russians who sought to live and work in Russia. Initially from European former Soviet states, migrant groups have increasingly arrived from former Soviet states in the Caucasus region and Central Asia in recent years.

Government authority was decentralized away from Moscow to Russia's other regions throughout the 1990s. And like other post-Soviet states, Russia was afflicted by demands for greater autonomy from ethnic and social groups, as well as outright secession movements. In Chechnya, Russian troops were forced to secede from the region in 1996 following their defeat in the first Chechen war.

Upon his rise to power in 1999 as acting President Vladimir Putin began reestablishing centralized, top-down rule over Russia. His path to the presidency coincided with the launch of the second Chechen war that brought the region back under Russian control in the 2000s. And while Cossack groups were permitted to reemerge as distinct cultural entities in the 1990s, Putin took more formal steps to reintegrate them into national military command, including using them in Chechen counterinsurgency operations.

Russian officials also became increasingly critical of Western-style multiculturalism. Though cultural and political rights were afforded to non-Russians and Putin warned against promoting Russian ethno-nationalism, the Kremlin has supported the need to build a patriotic identity within Russia through a civic identity of common values and traditions—notably the widespread adoption of the Russian language. Non-Russians would be welcomed in the Russian Federation, but it was ethnic Russians that would "cement this civilization." The ethnic Russian population has declined slightly since 1989, the year of the last

Soviet census. Ethnic Russians composed roughly 81.5 percent of Russia's population in 1989, 79.8 percent in 2002, and 77.7 percent in 2010. The 2021 census showed a remarkable drop to 71.7 percent, though this can largely be explained by "the declining importance of ethnicity as an identifier in ethnically homogeneous areas, such as the predominantly ethnic Russian oblasts of central Russia", and the rising number of ethnic Russians declining to declare their nationality.

To complement the country's political and cultural restructuring, the Kremlin merged several territories in the 2000s, and with the addition of Crimea in 2014, Russia boasted 85 federal subjects. Forty-six are ethnic-Russian dominated oblasts, with 22 republics that are home to an ethnic minority. Additionally, there are four autonomous okrugs or districts (with significant ethnic minority populations), nine krais (similar to oblasts), three federal cities, and one Jewish autonomous oblast.

Ethnicity and 21st Century Post-Soviet Conflicts

Russia's relatively successful efforts to foment patriotism among its multiethnic population and reforge a powerful, centralized state since 2000 contrasts to some other post-Soviet states. Ethnic rivalries within them have been exploited by the Kremlin to challenge their stability and sovereignty. Alongside using ethnic Russians living outside Russia to achieve these aims, Russia's own ethnic and social minorities have been primary participants in various conflicts and disputes abroad.

From 1989 to the early 1990s, for example, two Georgian separatist territories populated by ethnic minorities, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, waged wars against Georgian forces. Russia provided Abkhazians and South Ossetians with considerable military and economic aid, which increased after Georgia began drifting toward the West following the 2003 Rose Revolution. As Abkhazia and South Ossetia gained increasing autonomy from Georgia, tensions culminated in the 2008 Russo-Georgia War. In addition to aiding the ethnic separatists, the Russian military employed Cossack and Chechen militant groups against the Georgian armed forces in 2008. In the aftermath, the remaining ethnic Georgian populations were largely expelled from Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Both Cossacks and Chechens were also utilized by Russia during the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the launch of the proxy war in Russian-speaking

eastern Ukraine. Russian-speaking Ukrainians (including Ukrainian Cossacks), ethnic Russians in the south and east Ukraine, as well as those from across the former Soviet Union and beyond, filled the ranks of the pro-Russian separatist groups. These militants maintained a proxy conflict for Russia in Donetsk and Luhansk until the official Russian invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, and continue to take part in Russia's ongoing "special military operation." Additionally, Russia has used non-ethnic Russian minorities within Russia to fight at the frontline of the conflict, and they are reportedly dying at higher rates in Ukraine than their Slavic counterparts.

After reigniting conflicts in Georgia and launching one in Ukraine, Russia has also taken steps to annex their separatist territories. In the years before Russia's 2008 campaign in Georgia, the Kremlin steadily gave Russian passports to Abkhazians and South Ossetians, a tactic now known as passportization. The need to protect Russian citizens helped Russia justify the war and allowed it to more easily absorb these territories by granting them freedom of movement to Russia. Days after the war had concluded, the Kremlin recognized Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence in August 2008, and in 2022, South Ossetian leader Anatoly Bibilov declared the region's intention to join Russia, its "historical homeland."

And following Ukraine's lurch to the West in 2014, significant passportization took place in Ukraine. Days before the February 24, 2022, Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin recognized the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, likely in anticipation of future calls to join Russia. These two regions were annexed by Russia in September 2022, joining Russia as republics, while two oblasts (Kherson and Zaporozhye) were also annexed from Ukraine by Russia. Russian forces, however, have been unable to establish complete control over all of the claimed territories.

But the Kremlin also sees the Ukrainian war as an opportunity to "integrate" the country's population with its own amid Russia's declining population. For centuries, Russian strategists have believed that Ukrainians, viewed as a subcategory of the Russian ethnic identity, could help Russify parts of the country where ethnic Russians do not form a dominant majority. In 2014, more than 1 million Ukrainians fled the country's southeast to Russia, mostly just across the border. However, in keeping with the Kremlin's desire to populate other regions, Ukrainian refugees began moving to the Volga Basin, the Ural Mountains, the Far East, and other areas. Since the outbreak of full conflict in 2022, millions of

Ukrainians have fled to Russia or been forcibly removed, and have been resettled across the country. Thus, while the war in Ukraine is central to Putin's foreign policy ambitions, encouraging Ukrainian immigration to Russia is also an important domestic imperative.

Other regions across the former Soviet Union remain vulnerable to Russian attempts to use ethnicity to destabilize them. Since a 1992 ceasefire, Moldova's separatist region of Transnistria, populated largely by Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians, has been under the control of separatist authorities. Additionally, the Soviet 14th Army, which was stationed in Transnistria, was inherited by Russia after the Soviet collapse. Today, its remnants form Russia's part of the trilateral peacekeeping force (with Moldovan and Transnistrian soldiers) and the Operational Group of Russian Forces (OGRF), which guards old Soviet arms depots in the separatist region. Cultivating pro-Russian sentiment among Transnistria's Slavic majority, could quickly reignite the conflict. Russian military figures stated in April 2022 that the "second phase" of Russia's military campaign would annex enough of Ukraine to connect it to Transnistria, though this appears unfeasible for the foreseeable future.

After annexing Crimea in 2014, the Kremlin's declaration that it would protect ethnic Russians everywhere resonated with many of the millions of Russians scattered mostly in former Soviet states. In Central Asia and the Baltic states, where they are most numerous, ethnic Russians have faced restrictions on the use of the Russian language and other forms of cultural expression since the Soviet collapse, making exploitation easier. Kazakhstan's roughly 3.5 million Russians make up roughly 18 percent of the total population. Most ethnic Russians migrated primarily to northern Kazakhstan beginning in the 19th century and during the Soviet period, and have significant economic and political power. In Estonia and Latvia, ethnic Russians largely migrated during the Soviet period, and today form roughly 25 percent of the populations in both these countries. In addition to higher rates of unemployment, hundreds of thousands of Russians remain stateless persons in the Baltic states, as their citizenship (and those of their descendants) was denied after the Soviet collapse. Russia has leveraged these realities to help inflame social unrest, such as Estonia's 2007 Bronze Night incident, as well as wield indirect political representation through Estonia's Center party and Latvia's Harmony party. Significant passportization among Russians in the Baltic states has also taken place in the last few years.

Millions of ethnic Russians living in former Soviet states left for Russia in the 1990s and 2000s, reducing the Kremlin's influence over these countries. However, the Baltic states have seen more Russians immigrate than emigrate in recent years, while more than 200,000 Russians avoiding conscription during the ongoing war fled to Kazakhstan in September 2022. How the Kremlin exploits these changing circumstances remains to be seen. And as in Transnistria, Ukrainian and Belarusian communities in these countries also look to Russia for protection, particularly, in defending the use of the Russian language in their societies.

Predictions

Russia's ability to use ethnicity for domestic stability and as a foreign policy tool is not without risk. Nurturing ethnic Russian nationalism is unnerving to minority groups and has occasionally led to the eruption of ethnic violence, such as in the city of Kondopoga in 2006 and in Stavropol in 2007. Historical persecution has led to significant emigration even in modern times, which occurred among Russian Germans and Russian Jews in the 1990s. Giving minority groups greater rights could meanwhile instigate secession attempts, while failed attempts to merge additional federal subjects in 2020 demonstrate the limits of Russia's federal authority.

Russia's birth rate has rebounded from a record low of 1.25 children per woman in 2000 and was expected to reach 1.8 children per woman by 2020. But it is still below replacement level and there has been a significant population decline in Russia for years. While the population grew slightly during the 2010s, it is again shrinking. Minority groups often have higher birthrates than ethnic Russians, and though no ethnic minority groups equate to greater than 5 percent of Russia's total population, its various Muslim minorities amount to 10 to 15 percent of the population. Radical Islam came to partly define the Chechen independence movement in the 1990s, and many volunteer Muslim-Russians from across the country arrived to fight against Russian forces. The Kremlin is fearful of a similar situation in the future with its growing Muslim population.

The Kremlin will also have to contend with managing the delicate alliances it has with its minority groups. Clashes were reported in Ukraine between Chechen soldiers and those belonging to the Buryat minority group in 2022, while tension between Cossack groups and Russian nationalists has been evident since 2014. Russia will also inherit ethnic disputes as it seeks to expand its territory. More

than 260,000 Crimean Tatars returned to Crimea after the Soviet collapse, reviving historical animosity between them and local Cossack communities. Russia's war in Ukraine also risks solidifying anti-Russian sentiment in much of Ukraine's population.

Regardless of these threats, the Kremlin continues to push ahead with its vision to remake Russian society and disrupt its border regions. Russian officials increasingly define Russianness in cultural terms, inviting minority groups to be absorbed more effectively. Highlighting the importance of revered "Russian" leaders, such as Joseph Stalin (Georgian) and Catherine the Great (German) showcase the important leadership roles that non-Slavs have played in Russian history. Russia has also shown initiative in using other elements of minority cultures to expand its influence abroad. Russia has been an observer state of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation Countries (OIC) since 2005, and Putin has promoted the idea of the "similarity of the Russian and 'Islamic' approaches to many international issues." Chechen military personnel have been used in Russia's military campaign in Syria, while Tatar minorities are often responsible for Russian diplomatic and cultural outreach to Central Asia.

The Kremlin has, however, suppressed minority languages in Russia. This policy forms part of its efforts to promote Russian movies, television, social media, literature, and other media forms to Russify other countries. In 1939, for example, more than 80 percent of all Belarus inhabitants spoke Belarusian at home. By 1989, that had fallen to 65 percent, and by 2009, almost 70 percent of Belarusians spoke Russian at home. In 2017, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko expressed open alarm over this linguistic evolution, declaring that" [i]f we lose our ability to speak Belarusian, we will cease to be a nation." But Lukashenko's need to defeat the widespread protests against him after the 2020 election only deepened his reliance on Russia. The use of Belarusian territory to assist in the invasion of Ukraine and Lukashenko's cooperation with Putin will now completely isolate Belarus from the West, increasing its dependence on Russia further. The potential for even greater political, economic, and military integration between Russia and Belarus, formalized through the Union State, will only be further augmented by Belarus' steady adoption of the Russian language.

But the Kremlin's campaign in Ukraine will remain its most pressing imperative, and it has focused on efforts to alter and weaken Ukraine's demographics. For example, the war has prompted millions of Ukrainian citizens to leave the

country, and the longer they are away, the less likely they are to return. Reports on the forced transfer of Ukrainian minors from Ukraine to Russia have also been apparent since the beginning of the war, and roughly 20,000 Ukrainian children are estimated to have been sent to Russia, according to Ukrainian authorities. In March 2023, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for both Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, the Russian commissioner for children's rights, in connection with the affair. It is unlikely that either of them will ever be prosecuted, while Russia has stated that the population transfers are part of a humanitarian response to young Ukrainians made orphans by the war. Reducing Ukraine's population by creating refugees and bolstering Russia's by transferring orphans further demonstrate the demographic aspect to the conflict.

With centuries of experience in using ethnicity and conflict to redraw borders, the Kremlin has aimed to reconceptualize Ukrainian statehood. Reinforcing the notion that Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians are "one people" may help Russia expand its territory through conflict, and reverse its declining population by assimilating millions of potential Russians into the country. Whether this will be worth the consequences of sanctions and isolation from the West for the Kremlin will remain up for debate for the foreseeable future. A clear Russian defeat, however, would have disastrous implications for Russia's territorial integrity, and would likely inspire greater calls for separatism in Russia not only from ethnic minorities, but also ethnic Russian communities dissatisfied with living under Moscow's thumb. Thus, like Ukraine, Russia's fate will depend on the outcome of the war and its ability to consolidate its diverse population once hostilities decline.

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The Ancient Patterns Of Migration

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Today's hot-button issue is actually as old as the human race.

We live in an era of mass migration. According to the United Nations' World Migration Report 2022, there were 281 million international migrants in 2020, equaling 3.6 percent of the global population. That's well over twice the number in 1990 and over three times the estimated number in 1970. In countries that receive them, migrants are often blamed, rightly or wrongly, for everything from higher crime to declining wages to social and cultural disruption.

But the frictions provoked by migration are not new problems; they are deeply embedded in human history and even prehistory. Taking a long-term, cultural-historical perspective on human population movements can help us reach a better understanding of the forces that have governed them over time, and that continue to do so. By anchoring our understanding in data from the archeological record, we can uncover the hidden trends in human migration patterns and discern (or at least form more robust hypotheses about) our species' present condition—and,

perhaps, formulate useful future scenarios.

Globalization in the modern context, including large-scale migrations and the modern notion of the "state," traces back to Eurasia in the period when humans first organized themselves into spatially delimited clusters united by imaginary cultural boundaries. The archeological record shows that after the last glacial period—ending about 11,700 years ago—intensified trade sharpened the concept of borders even further. This facilitated the control and manipulation of ever-larger social units by intensifying the power of symbolic constructions of identity and the self.

Then as now, cultural consensus created and reinforced notions of territorial unity by excluding "others" who lived in different areas and displayed different behavioral patterns. Each nation elaborated its own story with its own perceived succession of historical events. These stories were often modified to favor some members of the social unit and justify exclusionist policies toward peoples classified as others. Often, as they grew more elaborate, these stories left prehistory by the wayside, conveniently negating the common origins of the human family. The triggers that may first have prompted human populations to migrate into new territories were probably biological and subject to changing climatic conditions. Later, and especially after the emergence of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, the impulse to migrate assumed new facets linked to culture.

From Nomadism to Migration

The oldest migrations by hominins—the group consisting of humans, extinct human species, and all our immediate ancestors—took place after the emergence of our genus, *Homo*, in Africa some 2.8 million years ago and coincided roughly with the appearance of the first recognizably "human" technologies: systematically modified stones. Interestingly, these early "Oldowan" tool kits (after the Olduvai Gorge site in Tanzania) were probably made not only by our genus but also by other hominins, including *Paranthropus* and Australopithecines.

What role did stone tools play in these early steps along our evolutionary path? Archeology tells us that ancient humans increasingly invested in toolmaking as an adaptive strategy that provided them with some advantages for survival. We see this in the noticeable increase in the geographical distribution of archeological sites beginning about 2 million years ago. This coincided with rising populations and also with the first significant hominin migrations out of Africa and into

Eurasia.

Toolmaking in Oldowan technocomplexes—distinct cultures that use specific technologies—shows the systematic repetition of very specific chains of operations applied to stone. This suggests that the techniques must have been learned and then incorporated into the sociobehavioral norms of the hominin groups that practiced them. In fact, there are similarities between the first Eurasian stone tool kits and those produced at the same time in Africa. Technological know-how was being learned and transmitted—and that implies that hominins were entering into a whole new realm of culture.

While the archeological record dating to this period is still fragmentary, there is evidence of a hominin presence in widely separated parts of Eurasia—China and Georgia—from as early as 2 million to 1.8 million years ago; we know that hominins were also present in the Near East and Western Europe by around 1.6 million to 1.4 million years ago. While there is no evidence suggesting that they had mastered fire making, their ability to thrive in a variety of landscapes—even in regions quite different from their original African savannah home—demonstrates their impressive adaptive flexibility. I believe that we can attribute this capacity largely to toolmaking and socialization.

How can we envision these first phases of human migrations?

We know that there were different species of *Homo* (*Homo georgicus*, *Homo antecessor*) and that these pioneering groups were free-ranging. Population density was low, implying that different groups rarely encountered each other in the same landscape. While they certainly competed for resources with other large carnivores, this was probably manageable thanks to a profusion of natural resources and the hominins' technological competence.

From around 1.75 million years ago in Africa and 1 million years ago in Eurasia, these hominins and their related descendants created new types of stone tool kits, referred to as "Acheulian" (after the Saint-Acheul site in France). These are remarkable for their intricacy, the standardization of their design, and the dexterity with which they were fashioned. While the Acheulian tool kits contained a fixed assortment of tool types, some tools for the first time displayed regionally specific designs that prehistorians have identified with specific cultural groups. As early as 1 million years ago, they had also learned to make fire.

Acheulian-producing peoples—principally of the *Homo erectus* group—were a fast-growing population, and evidence of their presence appears in a wide variety of locations that sometimes yield high densities of archeological finds. While nomadic, Acheulian hominins came to occupy a wide geographical landscape. By the final Acheulian phase, beginning around 500,000 years ago, higher population density would have increased the likelihood of encounters between groups that we know were ranging within more strictly defined geographical radiuses. Home base-type habitats emerged, indicating that these hominin groups returned cyclically to the same areas, which can be identified by characteristic differences in their tool kits.

After the Oldowan, the Acheulean was the longest cultural phase in human history, lasting some 1.4 million years; toward its end, our genus had reached a sufficiently complex stage of cultural and behavioral development to promulgate a profoundly new kind of cognitive awareness: the awareness of self, accompanied by a sense of belonging within a definable cultural unit. This consciousness of culturally based differences eventually favored the separation of groups living in diverse areas based on geographically defined behavioral and technological norms. This was a hugely significant event in human evolution, implying the first inklings of "identity" as a concept founded on symbolically manufactured differences: that is, on ways of doing or making things.

At the same time, the evidence suggests that networking between these increasingly distinct populations intensified, favoring all sorts of interchange: exchange of mates to improve gene pool variability, for example, and sharing of technological know-how to accelerate and improve adaptive processes. We can only speculate about other kinds of relations that might have developed—trading of stories, beliefs, customs, or even culinary or medicinal customs—since "advanced" symbolic communicative networking, emblematic of both Neandertals and humans, has so far only been recognized from the Middle Paleolithic period, from 350,000 to 30,000 years ago.

Importantly, no evidence from the vast chronological periods we have outlined so far suggests that these multilayered encounters involved significant inter- or intraspecies violence.

That remained the case moving into the Middle Paleolithic, as the human family expanded to include other species of *Homo* over a wide territorial range:

Neandertals, Denisovans, *Homo floresiensis*, *Homo luzonensis*, *Homo naledi*, Nesher Ramla *Homo*, and even the first *Homo sapiens*. Thanks to advances in the application of genetic studies to the paleoanthropological record, we now know that interbreeding took place between several of the species known to have coexisted in Eurasia: humans, Neandertals, and Denisovans. Once again, the fossil evidence thus far does not support the hypotheses that these encounters involved warfare or other forms of violence. By around 150,000 years ago, at least six different species of *Homo* occupied much of Eurasia, from the Siberian steppes to the tropical Southeast Asian islands, and still no fossil evidence appears of large-scale interpopulational violence.

Some 100,000 years later, however, other varieties appear to have died away, and *Homo sapiens* became the only *Homo* species still occupying the planet. And occupy it they did: By some time between 70,000 and 30,000 years ago, most of the Earth's islands and continents document human presence. Now expert in migrating into new lands, human populations flourished in constantly growing numbers, overexploiting other animal species as their dominion steadily enlarged.

Without written records, it's impossible to know with any certainty what kinds of relationships or hierarchies might have existed during the final phases of the Paleolithic. Archeologists can only infer from the patchy remains of material culture that patterns of symbolic complexity were intensifying exponentially. Art, body decoration, and incredibly advanced tool kits all bear witness to socially complex behaviors that probably also involved the cementing of hierarchical relationships within sharply distinct social units.

By the end of the last glacial period and into the Neolithic and, especially, protohistoric times—when sedentarism and, eventually, urbanism, began but before written records appear—peoples were defining themselves through distinct patterns and standards of manufacturing culture, divided by invented geographic frontiers within which they united to protect and defend the amassed goods and lands that they claimed as their own property. Obtaining more land became a decisive goal for groups of culturally distinct peoples, newly united into large clusters, striving to enrich themselves by increasing their possessions. As they conquered new lands, the peoples they defeated were absorbed or, if they refused to relinquish their culture, became the have-nots of a newly established order.

An Imagined World

After millions of years of physical evolution, growing expertise, and geographic expansion, our singular species had created an imagined world in which differences with no grounding in biological or natural configurations coalesced into multilayered social paradigms defined by inequality in individual worth—a concept measured by the quality and quantity of possessions. Access to resources—rapidly transforming into property—formed a fundamental part of this progression, as did the capacity to create ever-more efficient technological systems by which humans obtained, processed, and exploited those resources.

Since then, peoples of shared inheritance have established strict protocols for assuring their sense of membership in one or another national context. Documents proving birthright guarantee that "outsiders" are kept at a distance and enable strict control by a few chosen authorities, maintaining a stronghold against any possible breach of the system. Members of each social unit are indoctrinated through an elaborate preestablished apprenticeship, institutionally reinforced throughout every facet of life: religious, educational, family, and workplace.

Peoples belonging to "alien" constructed realities have no place within the social unit's tightly knit hierarchy, on the assumption that they pose a threat by virtue of their perceived difference. For any person outside of a context characterized by a relative abundance of resources, access to the required documents is generally denied; for people from low-income countries seeking to better their lives by migrating, access to documents is either extremely difficult or impossible, guarded by sentinels charged with determining identitarian "belonging." In the contemporary world, migration has become one of the most strictly regulated and problematic of human activities.

It should be no surprise, then, that we are also experiencing a resurgence of nationalistic sentiment worldwide, even as we face the realities of global climate deregulation; nations now regard the race to achieve exclusive access to critical resources as absolutely urgent. The protectionist response of the world's privileged, high-income nations includes reinforcing conjectured identities to stoke fear and sometimes even hatred of peoples designated as others who wish to enter "our" territories as active and rightful citizens.

Thanks to the very ancient creation of these conceptual barriers, the "rightful"

members of privileged social units—the haves—can feel justified in defending and validating their exclusion of others—the have-nots—and comfortably deny them access to rights and resources through consensus, despite the denigrating and horrific experiences these others might have undergone to ameliorate their condition.

Incredibly, it was only some 500 years ago that an unwieldy medieval Europe, already overpopulated and subject to a corrupt and unjust social system, (re)discovered half of the planet, finding in the Americas a distinct world inhabited by many thousands of peoples, established there since the final phases of the Upper Pleistocene, perhaps as early as 60,000 years ago. Neither did the peoples living there, who had organized themselves into a variety of social units ranging from sprawling cities to seminomadic open-air habitations, expect this incredible event to occur. The resource-hungry Europeans nevertheless claimed these lands as their own, decimating the original inhabitants and destroying the delicate natural balance of their world. The conquerors justified the genocide of the Indigenous inhabitants in the same way we reject asylum seekers today: on the grounds that they lacked the necessary shared symbolic referents.

As we step into a newly recognized epoch of our own creation—the Anthropocene, in which the human imprint has become visible even in the geo-atmospheric strata of our planet—humans can be expected to continue creating new referents to justify the exclusion of a new kind of migrant: the climate refugee. What referents of exclusion will we invoke to justify the refusal of basic needs and access to resources to peoples migrating from inundated coastal cities, submerged islands, or lands rendered lifeless and non-arable by pollutants?

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