

5 “Etnos-Thinking” in 1917 and Today

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Introduction

Just before the 2012 presidential elections, Vladimir Putin published an article devoted to the “national question.”¹ There the term *etnos* appeared as a category for understanding how post-Soviet migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus were guided by the leading vision of the Russian people. The Russian president noted that “[t]he self-determination of the Russian people [hinges] on a poly-ethnic civilization strengthened with Russian culture as its foundation.”² In this article he coined the phrase a “single cultural code” (*edinyi kulturn’yi kod*), which elaborates a sort of centralized version of multiculturalism wherein Russia is seen as a multinational society acting as a single people (*narod*). Originally, his ideas seem to have been aimed at creating a law that would protect the identity of this single people by reviving Soviet-era nationality registers, which tracked the *etnos* identity held by each individual. Most recently, Putin argued that his ethnocultural definition of the *Rossiiskii narod* should be militarized. At his speech at the 9 May celebrations in 2017, he spoke of the need to deploy military strength to protect the “very existence of the Russian people (*Rossiiskii narod*) as an *etnos*.”³ Here we witness a slippage from the use of *etnos* to denote non-Russian migrants to the use of *etnos* to diagnose a possible life threat to the biological vibrancy of a state-protected people. This led to a further controversy in October 2017 when Putin expressed worry about foreign scholars’ collecting genetic samples from “various *etnos-es*” across Russia. Spokespersons from the Kremlin further speculated that by holding this “genetic code,” foreign interests might be able to build a biological weapon.⁴

For most readers the term *etnos* will be unfamiliar. Incorrectly glossed as “ethnicity,” the term refers to a somewhat transhistorical

collective identity held by people speaking a common language, sharing a common set of traditions, and often said to hold a "common psychology" and share certain key physiognomic attributes. At first glance, the term is a biologically anchored definition of collective identity. It is distinctive since it diverts itself from the standard, postwar North Atlantic definition of ethnicity, which stresses that an individual has a choice over which social, linguistic, or confessional groups he or she might belong to.⁵ It however falls completely in line with early Bolshevik thinking, including Stalin's infamous 1913 pamphlet "Marxism and the National Question."⁶ Peter Skalník, an expert observer of the history of Soviet ethnography, distinguishes *etnos* as "a reified substance" distinct from the "relational" understandings of ethnicity that developed in North America and Europe.⁷ In other words, if modern European and North American analysts see ethnicity as a bundle of qualities – any one of which an individual might cite to describe his or her identity – Russian or Kazakh ethnographers experience an *etnos* as a coherent and enduring set of traits that only knowledgeable experts can see. Circulating around this single term are a number of strong assumptions about the durability of identities over time, the role of the expert eye in assigning identity, and the importance of physical bodies to stabilize and reproduce identities. The role of experts in identifying *etnoses* accentuates the concept's arcane quality. At times, the concept seems anchored like an internal family squabble among a relatively small group of ethnographers and geographers. At other times, the enduring *sameness* of a particular *etnos* is spoken of as so natural and self-evident that both politicians and scientists do not waste more than a few lines justifying how they associate people with a particular group. This naturalized, unreflective, and often hegemonic grouping together of a certain collection of people as an *obchshnost'* links both early Bolshevik thinking on nations and nationalities and early twenty-first-century arguments about the biosocial careers of nations within the Russian Federation.

1917 and *Etnos*

The October Revolution was an epoch-changing event wherein scientists and politicians worked together to craft a new technology of rule. As historian Francine Hirsch argues, this "revolutionary alliance" was built upon a set of significantly overlapping vocabularies of nationality that were not quite the same.⁸ Recent archival work suggests that academicians were already seeking to embed themselves within imperial state structures before the 1917 revolution, and that the revolution

offered them a new window of opportunity. Therefore, this politically evocative alliance was also rooted in deeply embedded ideas of co-cultural “sameness,” expressed at a collective level and recognized by qualified experts. This bundle of ideas – *ethnos*-thinking – was deployed practically and politically in the early Soviet period. It was somewhat unreflectively built into Soviet modernization itself – and came to haunt the Russian Federation after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Discussions about national identity and co-cultural “sameness” were erected upon a long tradition of empirical fieldwork throughout the Russian empire, and especially in eastern Siberia. Historians of anthropology often link the development of Russian ethnography to the founding of the Ethnological Division of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society in 1845.⁹ The history of that division is one of a constant alternation between the study of Slavic cultural forms and those of the non-Russian *inorodtsy* (pagan-foreigners), which the empire sought to incorporate but could never quite assimilate. Hirsch grounds her “revolutionary alliance” between imperial-era experts and Bolshevik organizers in the personal acquaintance and perhaps friendship of Vladimir Ulianov (Lenin) and Sergei Ol’denburg – the secretary of the Academy of Sciences. It is an interesting detail that this prominent Orientalist and ethnographer was brought up in Zabaikail’e – a frontier region on the eastern side of Lake Baikal bordering upon China. In Hirsch’s account, their long acquaintance, and important reacquaintance in 1917, may have cemented the collaboration between the academy’s scientists and the new Bolshevik government.¹⁰ An important part of their collaboration was the redeployment of at least two imperial-era scientific commissions to produce ethnographic studies on how to improve the lives of non-Russian nationalities. It is not commonly known that Ol’denburg’s homeland – Zabaikail’e – was one of several major ethnographic, geographic, and linguistic laboratories where these commissions experimented with their ideas. In particular, both the Commission for Establishing Ethnographic Maps and the Russian Committee of the International Association for the Study of Central Asia and the Far East sponsored several field projects in the area.¹¹ Both organizations were founded by Ol’denburg. These intersecting sets of field studies launched between 1903 and 1919 among Buriats and Tunguses (Evenkis) in Zabaikail’e, as well as in Turkestan, Sakhalin, and Mongolia, generated a wealth of data but more importantly opened a debate on the links between biological form and national identity. Soviet and post-Soviet *ethnos*-thinking bears the unmistakable signs of this early revolution-era debate.

Vocabularies of Identity in the Early Soviet Period

Standard accounts of nationality policy in the early Soviet Union revolve around Joseph Stalin's 1913 pamphlet "Marxism and the National Question," which would become a theoretical foundation of Bolshevik nationalities policy. After 1917, the recommended lexica for discussing identity and difference were the hierarchy of terms approved by Stalin, who held the post of People's Commissar of Nationalities from 1917 to 1923: *natsiia* (nation), *narodnost'* (nationality), *plemiia* (tribe).¹² Against the position of Austrian social democrats that "cultural national autonomy" could be held by minorities "personally" as an "association of peoples" not necessarily living together in a defined space, Stalin, at the behest of the Russian Bolshevik faction, argued for a much more holistic and territorially anchored definition of a nation, wherein a nation inhabited a defined region (*oblast'*),¹³ In that text he also introduced what came to be a standard shorthand for the gradual evolution of national consciousness from the stage of being tribal (*plemia*), to consolidating into that of a nationality (*narodnost'*), until finally achieving the status of a nation (*natsiia*). Each type of national consolidation was seen as justifying different types of territorial autonomy – the end result of which was reflected in the complex nested system of national autonomous districts and republics that characterized the Soviet Union. Hirsch was one of the first scholars to draw attention to the special conditions under which Stalin's text was written.¹⁴ She argued, convincingly, that the "sacred" status of this text needs to be contextualized within the polemics of the time. She draws attention to the fact that different groups of politicians and scholars held varying "vocabularies of nationality," which sometimes harmonized with each other and sometimes generated dissonance, creating the ensemble that came to be recognized as a single Soviet policy on nationality.¹⁵ While noting that there was a "significant overlap" in the terms used by Bolshevik party organizers and the ethnographers, geographers, and anthropologists working within the imperial Academy of Sciences, she pointed out that they nevertheless only "seemed to speak the same language."¹⁶ Her classic work is devoted to demonstrating how maps, censuses, and museums in the early Soviet period were the venues where specialists expressed these differing vocabularies, eventually creating a distinctive cultural technology of power.

I would like to argue that this early revolutionary discussion is part of a long-standing discussion on the nature of biosocial identities across Eurasia. Like Francine Hirsch, I recognize the important role

of competing vocabularies of nationality held by scholars and political actors at the time of the 1917 revolution. Her account implies that this process led to a unique “revolutionary alliance” between imperial scholars and Bolshevik organizers. I would like to contextualize this process further. Much of this debate hit upon very old ideas on how identities have been anchored in evocative landscapes, not to mention older “alliances” between ethnographers and the imperial state. To frame this argument, I would like to draw attention to a different aspect of Stalin’s classic text – a little-noticed but significant turn of phrase in which he describes the role of “stable commonalities” (*obshchnost’*) (literally “the quality of being the same”) in forming national identities.¹⁷ In this section, he links these commonalities to his now standard formula of connecting a nation to collectively held qualities such as language, a common territory, and economic “life,” as well as a particular psychological outlook. Although it is indisputable that the language of “tribes,” “nationalities,” and “nations” captures the formal political architecture of early Soviet thought, the conviction that people have a recognizable and enduring “sameness” falls into line with a distinctive narrative of power that has re-emerged in Putin-era ethnic governance, as well as in the nationalist discourse of strategist Aleksandr Dugin, where the use of *ethnos* is associated with powerful collectivities who have a moral right to control social behaviour.¹⁸ In the following section I will argue that, while the surprising reappearance of *ethnos* and what I have termed *ethnos*-thinking in Russia today is anchored in revolutionary policymaking, like many revolutionary legacies, the concept is not as straightforward as it appears.

The Soviet Resurgence of *Ethnos*-Thinking

Soviet nationalities policy continued to be driven by Stalin’s formulaic expressions of nationality, nations, and sameness, but it is perhaps significant that these terms barely survived Stalin’s death. After 1953, ethnographers began to question state-sanctioned rhetoric, but in 1964 *ethnos* was reinstated in a prominent opening address at the 1964 Congress of the International Union of Anthropologic and Ethnographic Sciences in Moscow to a largely indifferent audience of European and American anthropologists.¹⁹ In 1966, upon the nomination of the historian Iulian Bromlei as the new director of the Institute of Ethnography of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, *ethnos* became the keystone in a new architecture of ethnic governance.

This resurgence around the fiftieth anniversary of 1917 harked back to the revolutionary year itself. Although strands of *ethnos*-thinking

can be traced as far back as the seventeenth century, the first scholar to employ the term as a stand-alone, compact concept was Nikolai N. Mogilianskii (1871–1933) – a curator at the Russian Ethnographic Museum in St Petersburg.²⁰ In 1917 he published his definition of the term, which reads as follows:

The ἔθνος (*etnos*) concept – is a complex idea. It is a group of individuals united together as a single whole (*odno tseloe*) by several general characteristics. [These are:] common physical (anthropological) characteristics; a common historical fate, and finally a common language. These are the foundations upon which, in turn, [an *etnos*] can build a common world-view [and] folk-psychology – in short, an entire spiritual culture.²¹

His off-the-cuff definition was published in the context of a wide-ranging debate on the institutionalization of ethnography within Russian universities between 1914 and 1917 – a debate which overlaps entirely with Bolshevik polemics on the question of the collective qualities that go into the building of a nation.

Although Bromlei’s late-Soviet foray into *etnos* did not ignore the work of Mogilianskii, nor of course the work of Stalin, he did give the strong impression that his theory of *etnos* was self-invented. Yet his writing owed a great and unacknowledged debt to the émigré ethnographer Sergei M. Shirokogoroff, whose work, though not banned, was difficult to access. Peter Skalník even accused Bromlei of covertly plagiarizing Shirokogoroff’s work using his privileged access to the special collections of the Lenin library.²² The writings of this colourful and controversial figure, published primarily in English outside the Soviet Union, ironically serve as a central link between the *etnos*-thinking during the period of the Russian Revolution and civil war and the ethnographic imaginations of the Russian public in the contemporary period.

The Shirokogoroffs’ Field Research in Zabaikal’e

Sergei Shirokogoroff was appointed head of the Department of [Physical] Anthropology at the Museum of Anthropology in 1917 – a post he held until 1923 – despite the fact that by that time he was living in self-imposed exile in China.²³ Shirokogoroff is well known in the English language anthropological literature for his ethnographic work on Evenkis, whom he referred to alternately as Orochens and Tunguses. He is also renowned as an expert on Tungus shamanism.²⁴ Shirokogoroff’s interest in how bodily forms reflected aspects of national identity overlapped with many strands of developing social science, some of which

was of interest to Bolshevik politicians. Sergei and his wife, Elizaveta Shirokogoroff, would conduct three long-term field studies, first in Zabaikal'e among a mixed group of Orochens, nomadic Tunguses, and Buriats (1912; 1913), and then with Orochens and Manchus in Russian-controlled Manchuria (1915; 1916–17). Revolutionary events led to a situation where the couple had to make a choice whether or not to remain in Bolshevik-controlled Petrograd or to live in emigration. They chose to relocate first to Vladivostok, and then to a series of cities across China.²⁵ The bulk of their research was written up in English, although they continued to correspond intensively both with colleagues in the Soviet Union and with Russian colleagues living overseas. They each died in Beiping during the Japanese occupation of Manchukuo. The fieldwork that the couple first did would be analysed and published only in 1923 in a wide-ranging volume entitled *The Anthropology of Northern China*, comparing a number of peoples across eastern Eurasia.²⁶

This publication shortly followed the Russian-language debut of Shirokogoroff's *ethnos* theory, first in pamphlet form and then in book form in 1922.²⁷ Although physically situated within a vibrant community of émigré scholars outside the Soviet Union, Shirokogoroff's thinking on "guiding" nationalities and territorially compact ethnic groups would remain influential for Soviet ethnographers, who cited his work, discreetly, in specialist publications.²⁸ However, like many of the slippery moments in this play of "vocabularies," the way in which his thinking was implemented by Bromlei in the 1960s was far from what he had intended.

Ethnos theory in the late Soviet period came to be seamlessly integrated into the way the state allocated resources, and as a result, became a guiding theme in the way in which professional Soviet ethnographers defined themselves. It was widely assumed that with the collapse of central state control over regional development, the term would disappear from public life and ethnography would move to querying local understandings of how individuals saw themselves. Instead, the term gained increasing influence both within some sectors of the academy and increasingly within public life.

In the 1980s, as the mass movements began to question the hegemony of the Soviet state, prominent Russian intellectuals distanced themselves from the term and tried to introduce liberal and individualist notions of ethnic choice. The most evocative attack came from former director of the Institute of Ethnography Valerii Tishkov, in his *Requiem for Ethnos*.²⁹ Yet this resilient term did not vanish; rather, in the post-socialist period, it became more popular in the press, in Dugin's ideology, in provincial academies, and most conspicuously in the speeches of President Putin himself.

Etnos Theory in Putin's Russia

The biosocial identities forged at the beginning of the Soviet period are arguably indispensable to ordering the world in the contemporary Russian Federation. One way to explain this persistence is through the long-term survival of variants of *etnos*-thinking within the "revolutionary alliance" that structured the Soviet state, as well as the resilient way in which this biosocial lineage propagated itself within a set of circumlocutory expressions. The explosion of *etnos*-talk in the Putin era is most tangible among regional elites. Since the fall of the Soviet Union there has been an upsurge in publications on the ethnogenetic histories of various national groups. There is a strong quality to these works on cultural resilience and survival that one might identify as a type of Indigenous-rights discourse. Indeed, this quality is arguably closer to the way in which scholars like Shirokogoroff conceived of the term. The *etnos* term itself appears directly in the title of a number of regional collections as a way to emphasize their sense of pride and their expectation of respect for their nationality. Volumes such as *The Reality of the Etnos* or *The Etnoses of Siberia* place their emphasis on the longevity, energy, and persistence of cultural minorities.³⁰ They have manifesto-like qualities in that they insist on the vibrancy of cultural difference. This process, which I once called "nationality inflation," can be seen in a number of examples such as in the "somatic nationalism" analysed by Sergei Oushakine in the Altai republic.³¹ Even Valerii Tishkov in the 2016 retrospective review of his *Requiem* was forced to acknowledge that "etno-identities" are characteristic of Russia now, and likely "forever" (*navsegda*).³² The passion with which regional elites have been attracted to *etnos* theory was a major theme in the analysis of Mark Bassin.³³ Ranging from nostalgia for Stalinist essentialism to the Eurasian geopolitics of the twenty-first century, he sees this "biopolitical" term as able to stand in for concerns about modernization and environmentalism, cultural survival, and the strengthening of the newly independent Turkic states.

Conclusion

Etnos theory in contemporary Russia can trace its roots to a "revolutionary alliance" between scholars and politicians in the early revolutionary period, and arguably beyond. The theory differs subtly but distinctively from North American writing on ethnicity in its concern for collective identities, which cannot be curated by a single individual and which are crafted inter-generationally. Many adherents of the theory in the imperial period, the Soviet period, and the post-Soviet

period further mark a certain somatic or physical anthropological consistency to an *ethnos* – a type of discourse that is read uneasily by Euro-American scholars. It was the surprise of the century that, with the fall of the Soviet Union, this collectivist and biosocial theory did not wither away but instead became even more prolific. It left the safe haven of the academy and continued to expand in the public sphere, appropriated alike by right-wing nationalists such as Dugin and the Russian president. *Etnos*-talk is one of the more substantial artefacts of the Russian Revolution in the post-socialist present and, at the same time, a testament to the *longue durée* persistence of certain concepts in Russian ethnic governance.

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NOTES

- 1 Putin, "Rossiia: natsional'nyi vopros."
- 2 Ibid. All translations from Russian are mine.
- 3 "'Putin predlozhlil tost v chest' Dnia Pobedy."
- 4 Zyrianova, "'Utechka biodannykh.'"
- 5 Lachenicht, "Ethnicity."
- 6 Stalin, "Marksizm i natsional'nyi vopros."
- 7 Skalník, "Gellner vs Marxism," 116.
- 8 Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 35–45.
- 9 Knight, "Constructing the Science of Nationality"; Tokarev, *Istoriia russkoi Etnografii*.
- 10 Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 23.
- 11 Histories of this committee can be found in Alymov and Podrezova, "Mapping Etnos"; Ol'denburg, "Russkii komitet dlia izucheniia Srednei i Vostochnoi Azii"; and Kisliakov, "Russkii Komitet dlia izucheniia Srednei i Vostochnoi Azii (RKSV)."
- 12 Stalin, "Marksizm i natsional'nyi vopros."
- 13 Bottomore and Goode, *Austro-Marxism*; Bauer, *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*, 281.

- 14 Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 28.
- 15 Ibid., 35–45.
- 16 Ibid., 35–6.
- 17 Stalin, "Marksizm i natsional'nyi vopros," 291–302.
- 18 Dugin, "Evoliutsiia Natsional'noi idei Rusi (Rossii) na raznykh istoricheskikh Etapakh."
- 19 The indifferent reception of the term is described in Anderson and Arzyutov, "The Etnos Archipelago."
- 20 For the early eighteenth- and nineteenth-century roots of *etnos* discourse see Vermeulen, *Before Boas*; and Alymov, "Ukrainian Roots of the Theory of Etnos."
- 21 Mogilianskii, "Predmet i zadachi *ē*tnografii," 11.
- 22 Skalnĭk, "Towards an Understanding of Soviet Etnos Theory."
- 23 Anderson and Arzyutov, "The Etnos Archipelago," Section 2.
- 24 Shirokogoroff's key works on Tungus ethnography and shamanism are in Shirokogoroff, *Social Organization of the Northern Tungus*; and *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus*.
- 25 Anderson and Arzyutov, "The Etnos Archipelago."
- 26 Shirokogoroff, *Anthropology of Northern China*.
- 27 Shirokogorov, *Etnos – issledovanie osnovnykh printsipov izmeneniia *ē*tnicheskikh i *ē*tnograficheskikh iavlenii*; and *Mesto *ē*tnografii sredi nauk i klassifikatsiia *ē*tnosov*.
- 28 A full list of Soviet-era citations to Shirokogoroff's work can be found in Anderson and Arzyutov, "The Etnos Archipelago."
- 29 The *Requiem* was published in Russian as Tishkov, *Rekviem po etnosu*. Tishkov also published an English-language version of his arguments in a prominent American anthropology journal: Tishkov, "The Crisis in Soviet Ethnography."
- 30 Goncharov, Gashilova, and Baliasnikova, eds, *Real'nost' *ē*tnosa*; Makarov, ed. *Etnosy Sibiri*.
- 31 Nationality inflation was discussed in Anderson, *Identity and Ecology in Arctic Siberia*. Oushakine discussed somatic nationalism in Oushakine, "Somatic Nationalism."
- 32 Tishkov, "Ot etnosa k etnichnosti i posle."
- 33 Bassin, *The Gumilev Mystique*.

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