

Racializing Central Asia during the Russian-Ukrainian War MIGRATION FLOWS AND ETHNIC HIERARCHIES

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This memo looks at three patterns of mobility into and out of Central Asia in the current period affected both by the war in Ukraine and historical structures of colonialism and racialization. We analyze labor migration flows into Russia, migrants and minorities going to Ukraine to fight, and Russian citizens fleeing Russia southward to escape the effects of war. We argue that the latter two flows are not traditional migration patterns. Rather, they represent important developments driven by the conflict and embedded in colonial structures of whiteness, or the idea that light-skinned, blue-eyed Slavic nationalities are the cultural norm from which other groups are measured. Colonialism and racism in this sense refer not only to policies and formal hierarchies during the Russian imperial and Soviet periods but also to the entrenched mentalities that persist today. The consequences for visible minorities in Russia involve regular discrimination in society, by authorities on the streets and in the housing and labor market, and with citizenship and army draft procedures.

Mobility and Race

Global migration patterns and pathways are traditionally [entangled](#) with colonial histories, and the situation is no different in Eurasia. The history and critical study of colonialism in the West have recently come under [long-overdue criticism](#) for not [integrating](#) Russian [imperialism](#) into their analytical frameworks. Indeed, there are

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important post-colonial [pathways](#) that are crucial for [understanding](#) the relationship between Russia and its former colonies (now neighbors).

The war in Ukraine has brought these dynamics violently to the forefront. Yet lingering behind the scenes of the brutal treatment of Ukraine is an expanse of Russia's periphery of independent states that suffer from colonial effects compounded by a racialization that Ukraine does not experience. Russia's aggression toward Ukraine is firmly rooted in Ukraine's desire to separate itself from a wider union of Slavic nations (Belarus, Russia, Ukraine) or Ukraine's view of itself as something different than Russia. Central Asian or Caucasian identity, on the other hand, and even ethnic minorities within the current borders of the Russian Federation are "[othered](#)" outside this Slavic identity.

From Russian imperial rule to common statehood [during](#) the Soviet Union, Slavic culture and Russian language became central within the largest swath of earth controlled by a single government. Centralized government and the movement of ethnic Russians into the "periphery" were methods of pursuing cultural and linguistic uniformity that are common to colonial powers. Many Russians [deny](#) these developments were colonial in nature, pursuing the counter-narrative that Russian imperialism and the Soviet Union brought development to backward regions. Tracing three mobility flows in the current period affected by long-standing structures of colonialism and racialization allow us to see the effects of these long-standing power structures. These flows include 1) labor migration into Russia, 2) migrants and minorities going to Ukraine to fight, and 3) Russian citizens fleeing Russia southward.

A Typical Colonial Scenario

Labor migration flows are perhaps the most "traditional" of the people movements and can offer the readiest link to existing post-colonial theory. Indeed, it is [accepted](#) almost as a law of nature that contemporary migration flows follow previous colonial linkages. These flows are often facilitated by a common language and preferential legal frameworks. According to this [logic](#), when Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Kyrgyz seek work abroad, they are oriented toward Russia because of a visa-free regime, common legal understandings, and Russian language, all of which are legacies of common statehood during the Soviet Union.

Millions of citizens of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan work in Russia every year, making Russia one of the [four](#) largest countries of immigration. Many of these migrants are driven by unemployment and underemployment in their home countries and increasingly by the idea that migration is a coming-of-age experience that helps family systems to earn money for major life-cycle events such as [weddings](#) and [home purchases](#), which are important aspects of [social prestige](#). Some seek permanent residence and citizenship to have more secure legal status in Russia, while many others work in a state of legal limbo without the correct documents.

Migrants have become [habituated](#) to [precarity](#) in Russia and have developed [strategies](#) to reduce the risk of being in a visible and racialized position within society and the labor market. To confront [discrimination](#), they rely on [networks](#) of compatriots and work in [brigades](#). In response to police who stop them on the street for document checks and to extract bribes, migrants have developed many strategies. From paying protection money to local patrolmen to knowing the law and language and asserting one's rights, there is an array of techniques migrants use to navigate life in Russia. Though habituation demonstrates the ability of migrants to carve out spaces of agency amid injustice, it also speaks to the structural nature of social hierarchies owing to the persistently racialized identities of non-Slavs.

The war in Ukraine has upset many of the routines and assumptions that migrants rely on. Not only is the Russian economy more unpredictable under Western sanctions, but many citizens of Central Asian countries feel intuitive solidarity with Ukraine, which has played itself out in [humanitarian campaigns](#), [anti-war protests](#), and [fierce social media debates](#). As Russian media diversity shrank to a singular Kremlin propaganda lens, Central Asian media and the personal networks through which migrants share news remained open. Central Asian citizens who had applied for Russian [citizenship](#) were advised to [leave](#) because they were in danger of being drafted. Nonetheless, the [destabilization](#) of Central Asian economies by the Western sanctions against Russia risks [creating conditions](#) when some labor migrants are still oriented toward Russia in search of income, especially under new levels of economic precarity in their home region.

Racialized Soldiers

While some Central Asian migrants left Russia in response to the war, others [joined](#) the Russian army to fight in Ukraine. Many were lured with promises of fast-track citizenship and considerable [salary](#) if they joined. Such promises offer an attractive alternative to institutionalized police surveillance and extortion they continuously [experience](#). Military service in Russia is often a tax on the poor since those with connections or means are able to [avoid conscription](#) more easily. In depressed regions such as Buryatia and Dagestan, joining the army becomes a relatively secure way to earn a living. But it is not only Central Asians who are vulnerable to becoming cannon-fodder for Russia's campaign in Ukraine. Russia's many [minority](#) groups are also disproportionately sent to Ukraine (often [returning](#) in caskets).

Considering many Russian ethnic minorities live in [institutionalized poverty](#), it is no surprise that soldiers from these regions are dying in higher numbers in Ukraine than others, such as Slavs from major urban capitals. Researcher Kamil Galeev [observes](#) how the army has become an "army of minorities" with a hierarchy from lowly "pressganged" Central Asian immigrants to "country folk" to impressive Chechen soldiers (whose roles in active campaigns have been [questioned](#)). While North Caucasian and Central Asian soldiers' bodies are weaponized by the Kremlin, earning those communities a racialized

stigma in Ukraine and potentially fracturing solidarity among victims of Russian imperialism, Ramzan Kadyrov appears to have bargained his allyship to President Vladimir Putin for a visible yet removed role for Chechen soldiers.

There is, of course, a great irony that Russia's minorities are disproportionately dying for the idea of the "Russian world," or the idea of the unity of all Slavic nations as the rightful rulers of the Russian-speaking world. Russian non-Slavic ethnic groups that fight and die in Ukraine are often [treated](#) with the same suspicion by their compatriots as Central Asian migrants, especially in Russia's capitals. They have been called "[black](#)" or "[Asian](#)," receive extra scrutiny by the police, and have been [restricted](#) from [housing](#) kept for "[Slavs only](#)." Since 2014, brown-skinned Russians have [earned](#) a reputation in Ukraine as "Donbas Indians" and "Putin's fighting Buryats."

Several groups in Russia and abroad have begun to push back against the seeming dispensability of minority soldiers. Free Buryatia is an international anti-war [group](#) that uses social media to create solidarity among anti-war Buryats and works to change their image from those that do Putin's bidding to a region that desires increased freedom and autonomy within Russia's Federation. This group, much like groups of mothers of soldiers inside Russia, not only focuses on social solidarity but puts pressure on the government.

These small and sometimes individualized efforts by those in Russia affected most by Russia's war on Ukraine may not scale up into national movements or regime overthrow, but they produce important micro solidarities between those affected by challenging the state through everyday encounters that resist the injustice embedded in the system. Nevertheless, that there are [fewer](#) deaths representing residents of Russia's major urban capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg, reflects the ongoing privilege of class and whiteness concentrated in these population centers.

Resisting Recolonization

The war brought on a mass exodus of Russian citizens leaving Russia, either in protest over the invasion, in response to decreasing space for [civic activism](#) or economic opportunity, or amid rumors of mass conscription. While not all of those leaving were ethnic Russians, their movement into the Caucasus and Central Asia provoked fears among these nations of undermining the political, linguistic, and cultural progress they had achieved since independence in 1991. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, and even in the late Soviet period, national solidarity movements had worked to dismantle Russian political and cultural-linguistic dominance through the revival of national languages and histories. The ethnic balance of countries bordering Russia, such as Kazakhstan, has shifted dramatically to favor titular populations in the ensuing years.

Yet the mass movement from Russia southward is a strange moment that does not fit well into existing theories of how people and power move. It is nothing short of astonishing for citizens of a former colonizer to seek refuge among those colonized.

The return of Russians brings fear of a form of recolonization. Social media is awash with statements ranging from the [spirit](#) of, “they are welcome to come, but they’d better understand their place and not expect to dominate us!” to [concerns](#) about the potential strain the influx of Russian refugees will cause on the housing and job markets, disadvantaging locals. Some have [framed Russian](#) refugees as a potential gain for Central Asian countries, representing a high-quality trained cadre with language skills. On May 2, British Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan Charles Garrett [tweeted](#) that young Russian refugees comprise a valuable resource for the Central Asia republic, urging the Kyrgyz government to retain the new migrants. This illustrated a stark difference from the surveillance and racialized policing that Kyrgyz migrants have experienced in Russia for decades. Will these racial attitudes persist among refugees and return migrants? Central Asian economies, which are now [destabilized](#) as collateral damage of the Western sanctions against Russia, are challenged to accommodate both Russian refugees and many local workers returning or abstaining from their usual labor migration to Russia.

In Kazakhstan, fears related to the influx of Russian refugees are compounded because, in January 2022, Russia-led CSTO troops were [invited](#) in to ensure peace in the wake of protests that were taken over by violent political groups. Kazakhstani leaders have consistently framed their position vis a vis Russia as one of resilience and autonomy, even as some Western analysts [see](#) associations such as the CIS and EEU as Russian encroachment.

At the beginning of the Ukraine war, there was fear that Russia would call on Kazakhstan to commit troops as a quid pro quo. There was also fear, stretching all the way back to Russia’s first incursion into Ukraine, that Kazakhstan had striking parallels with Ukraine and was therefore next on Russia’s annexation list. In 2014, Putin [commented](#) that Kazakhstan did not have a history of statehood before the Soviet Union, which found echoes in similar claims about Ukraine. Attempts by Russian elites to frame Kazakhstan’s January 2022 events as an ethnic conflict against Russians are eerily similar to rhetoric about “saving” Ukraine from fascists.

Can Russians integrate into Central Asian societies in a productive way that furthers a multinational post-colonial society? While there are certainly some in Central Asia that are sympathetic to Russia and its imperial aims, many Central Asian Russians are decidedly separate from those in Russia. Many Kazakhstani Russians, for example, comment that when they travel to Russia, they are seen as outsiders. Many also have Ukrainian roots. These Russians [do not want](#) to be “saved” by Russia. Central Asia is their home. Some are increasingly understanding the importance of the titular [languages](#) and are making efforts to learn them.

The looming question is whether the new Russian migrants seeking refuge in the country will become like these Central Asian Russians. Do they have a better chance of understanding what it means to dismantle the privilege and whiteness of being Slavic now that they are outside of their comfort zone, encountering and demystifying for themselves regions often [deemed](#) as “backward” than their compatriots who chose to remain in Russia? It is possible since many of the Russians leaving for Central Asia are fleeing in protest of an unjust war. In migration studies, there is a “mobility bias” that artificially naturalizes movement when in reality, most people do not leave their home countries or even cities. This means those Russians that left are highly motivated, while more passive recipients of Russian propaganda remain in Russia. The opportunity to include Russian defectors in the decolonial movement is ripe.

Conclusions

As the Russian war against Ukraine rages on, it is difficult to maintain the initial level of attention from the international community and encapsulate all the intricate consequences of this war for the Eastern European and Central Asian regions. The migration patterns that the Russian invasion has set in motion are economically disruptive. They are also quite unusual in the context of post-colonial power dynamics, making it difficult to predict outcomes. While military action in Ukraine and the refugee crisis occurring in its neighboring countries remain the epicenter of the conflict, the price of the war for Central Asia remains obscured.

A newfound interest in understanding and deconstructing Russian imperialism can be cohesive and decolonial in nature only if it encapsulates the racial power hierarchies present within Russia and across the lands historically affected by Russia’s colonial project. The interest in Russian imperialism and extension of solidarity with Ukraine from across the globe offers a unique opportunity to diagnose all colonial powers, Western and non-Western alike, through communal resistance, macro and micro-level solidarities, and shared knowledge. However, we must recognize that not all knowledge currently produced on the topic is comprehensive or harmless. Rather than including Central Asia as an addendum in discussions of Russian imperial violence in Ukraine, there is a need for conversations focusing on Central Asian experiences and the burden of being a Soviet and Russian racialized Other.