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ANALYSIS

Buryatia and Buryats in Light of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstrac

This paper looks at how the Russo-Ukrainian war has affected Buryatia and Buryats, as well as what this might mean for the future of the region. Buryats are a Mongolic ethnic group who have historically been split across three countries: Russia, Mongolia, and China. Based on the available data, it appears that Buryats and/or soldiers from Buryatia are overrepresented among casualties on the Russian side. The article explores this overrepresentation and local reactions thereto, placing these grievances in historical context.

The war in Ukraine has escalated discussions of ethnic identity and belonging among ethnic minority populations in the Russian Federation. Many are redefining what it means to be an ethnic minority in Russia and their place in the country's social and political fabric. Official Russian discourse emphasizes unity between the three Eastern Slavic peoples: Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. While the Russian state has waged a war to realize this vision, its non-Slavic minorities are debating their place in the Slavic-dominated nation. These debates are important and consequential for the present and the future of the Russian Federation. Ethnic minority citizens constitute around one-fifth of the population of Russia. In terms of territory, 26 of Russia's 83 internationally recognized federal subjects are political units that have historically been governed by indigenous and/or ethnic minority groups (of which 21 are republics, 1 is an autonomous oblast, and 4 are autonomous okrugs).

On the one hand, the Russo-Ukrainian war has facilitated deeper integration of minorities into Russia. Many have sacrificed their lives for the country or endured war- and sanctions-related effects such as restricted international mobility. A disproportionate share of Russia's casualties appear to come from minority regions; they also appear to be overrepresented in military drafting.[1] Some seek to justify these losses using the Russian state's official narratives, making a concerted effort to increase the connection of ethnic minorities to the state. To give just one striking example, in a speech in the early days of the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin commemorated a deceased Lak lieutenant, granting him the title of Hero of Russia: "When I see examples of such heroism, like the feat of the young man Nurmagomed

1 According to data from August 24, 2023, Buryatia has the fifth-highest official casualty rate in Russia (898). It is the second-highest casualty rate when accounting for the size of the region's population. Much more populous Moscow has 309 casualties, while St. Petersburg has 305. "Russian Casualties in Ukraine," *Mediazona*, accessed August 4, 2023, https://en.zona.media/article/2022/05/20/casualties_eng.

Gadzhimagomedov, born in Dagestan, of Lak ethnicity, and our other soldiers, I want to say, I am Lak, I am Dagestani, I am Chechen, Ingush, Russian, Tatar, Jewish, Mordvin, Ossetian" ("Vladimir Putin's speech during the Security Council meeting, 2022, my translation).

On the other hand, the war has sparked oppositional movements among ethnic minorities of Russia, including Buryats, Tuvans, and Chechens. They debate and question their place in Russia for a number of reasons, among them the higher casualty counts and higher conscription rates in some ethnic minority regions; the racism and structural discrimination they have long experienced in Russia; and the traumatic history of Russian colonization that they share with Ukrainians. A wide range of minority political and cultural movements have emerged or gained strength since the start of the large-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022. Although they are based in the diaspora because of the illiberal climate and the criminalization of oppositional politics in Russia, some of these organizations also have anonymous contributors and volunteers within Russia. The reach of these anti-war and other political and cultural diasporic organizations within Russia is unclear. However, my interlocutors in Ulaanbaatar in autumn 2022, who fled Russia after the "partial mobilization" was announced on September 21, 2022, were well aware of the activities of some of these organizations, such as the Free Buryatia Foundation. Even though some considered their activists to be out of touch with the current situation in Buryatia, they nonetheless quoted the Free Buryatia Foundation's data analyses and statistics and discussed—if sometimes critically—its use of decolonial vocabulary with respect to Buryatia.

In what follows, I look at how the war has affected Buryatia and Buryats, as well as what this might mean for the future of the region.[2]

Buryatia Past and Present

The Republic of Buryatia is a multiethnic, multi-religious region in the Far Eastern district of Russia (it was until 2018 part of the Siberian Federal District). It borders Mongolia to the south and incorporates Lake Baikal on its western side. Its population is approaching one million, while its territory is similar in size to that of Germany. The capital city of the Republic is Ulan-Ude, which boasts almost 440,000 inhabitants. Demographically, the indigenous group of Buryats constitute around one-third of the population. Ethnic Russians make up most of the remaining inhabitants, while Evenks, Soyots, and others are represented in much smaller numbers.

Buryats are a Mongolic ethnic group who have historically been split across three countries: Russia (more than 460,000), Mongolia (almost 44,000) and China (approx. 10,000). Within Russia, they have historically resided not only in the Republic of Buryatia, but also in what is now Irkutsk oblast (almost 75,000) and Zabaikal'skii krai (over 65,000). Buryat lands were colonized during the Russian eastward expansion: the Udinskoe fort was established in 1666 and later became the town Verkhneudinsk (now Ulan-Ude). In the official version of Russian history, the process by which the Buryat population and lands were incorporated into Russia is portrayed as voluntary accession. Yet numerous historians highlight its violent and involuntary nature.

The Buryats' imperial history includes several especially tragic periods. In fact, Buryat outmigration waves to Mongolia and China were the result of tensions with the Russian authorities. These transborder migrations increased in the early twentieth century. One large wave of outmigration was related to the Russian Revolution and the new Bolshevik power, another to collectivization and the Stalinist repressions. In the Soviet Union, Buryats suffered the consequences of dekulakization, collectivization, and forced settlement (having previously nomadized) in the late 1920s and 1930s. The Stalinist repressions were detrimental to the Buryat population in the Soviet Union: on top of dekulakisation and political charges, many were also charged with pan-Mongolism and ties to Japan and suffered through anti-religious repressions. In parallel with this loss of lives and livelihoods, the Buryat language and culture were in many ways undermined and devalued during the Soviet decades. At the same time, the Soviet period did bring great educational and economic advancement. Historian Melissa Chakars (2014) refers to the Buryats as the "model minority" of the USSR and a Soviet success story, as representatives of the group advanced rapidly in Soviet society. As the USSR dissolved, 85 percent of Buryatia's voters wished to preserve the union—a share 10 percent higher than the Union average (Chakars 2014: 256).

While early post-Soviet Russia saw cultural and religious revivals, the space for cultural sovereignty and political autonomy has shrunk over the years, especially during Putin's rule. In Buryatia, many activists speak of the 2008 consolidation (Rus. *ukrupnenie*) in the region—whereby Ust'-Orda Autonomous Okrug was joined with Irkutsk oblast' and Agin-Buryat Autonomous Okrug was joined with Chita oblast (subsequently renamed Zabaikal'skii krai)—as a watershed moment in local politics. Having previously constituted a large part of the popula-

2 This text is based on one month of ethnographic field research in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, split between October 2022 and July 2023, with those who fled Buryatia following the "partial mobilization," as well as online research and my previous long-term ethnographic research in Buryatia since 2015 on the topics of identity, religion, and collective representation.

tion of the Autonomous Okrugs, which accorded them more substantial minority self-governance, Buryats are now a small minority in the Russian-dominated oblasts. With the merger, they lost powers including budget allocations, local dumas, and having their own representatives in the Russian federal duma. Diminished minority language rights are also an important aspect of what is locally experienced as increased Russification: since 2017, minority languages have become an optional subject and their teaching in schools must be limited to a maximum of two hours per week.

Buryats and the Russo-Ukrainian War

During the war in Ukraine, Buryats have suffered both a seemingly disproportionate casualty count on the Russian side and disproportionate misrepresentation as some of the main and cruelest perpetrators of the invasion. To start with the latter point, many media and social media accounts have reproduced the myth of "Putin's combative Buryats" (Rus. *boevye buryaty Putina*), a racist label that has roots in the 2014 invasion of East Ukraine and is often used for any Russian Asian soldiers. Buryat participation in the war and their supposed extreme cruelty and thievery there have been the subject of racist discussions in the Russian and international media. Even the Pope has named Buryats, along with Chechens, as the cruelest soldiers on the Russian side, contrasting them to those "of the Russian tradition" (The Editors 2022).

According to data analysis by the Free Buryatia Foundation from March 23, 2023, Buryatia is the region of Russia with the third-highest overall casualty count (546) and second-highest casualty count per capita (55.6 per 100,000). It is also the region with the third-highest rate of casualties among the mobilized, both overall (81) and per capita (8.2 for each 100,000). The organization further reports that inhabitants of Buryatia are mobilized 2.5 to 3 times more often than the Russian average and that the number of deaths among mobilized persons from Buryatia is more than a hundred times higher than that of mobilized persons from Moscow (Free Buryatia Foundation, March 29, 2023). These statistics refer to inhabitants of the region rather than solely ethnic Buryats, but based on preliminary data, ethnic Buryats appear to be slightly overrepresented in the Russian army: they constitute around 0.6 percent of the Russian army but only 0.34 percent of the Russian population (Vyushkova & Sherkhonov 2023: 133).

My Buryat interlocutors in Ulaanbaatar were well aware of Buryatia's disproportionate losses but held differing opinions as to whether this was attributable to ethnic, economic, or other factors. Just as Buryats themselves debate the disparities in fatality count, so too do social scientists. Sociologist Alexey Bessudnov (2023: 883) argues that the overrepresentation of members of some ethnic minority groups among the casualties is due to the poor socioeconomic standing of these regions: "When regional socioeconomic disparities are accounted for, ethnic differences in mortality rates are considerably reduced." Considering ethnic minorities and Russians from the same region, Bessudnov (2023: 892) claims, in most regions there is little difference in the fatality count. However, he determines ethnicity by the person's name, which makes for a conservative estimate, since many Buryats and other minorities have Russian names. In contrast, employing a more elaborate method for determining the ethnicity of casualties, Mariya Vyushkova and Evgeny Sherkhonov (2023: 134) find a substantial overrepresentation of ethnic Buryats in the casualty count of Buryatia (42.4 percent of casualties but 30 percent of the population), Zabaikal'skii krai (24.2 and 6.8 percent), and Irkutsk oblast' (5.8 and 3.3 percent), the three regions with substantial indigenous Buryat populations. As they conclude, "For such Asian ethnicities as Buryats, Tuvans, and Kazakhs, the risk of dying in this war is several times greater than for ethnic Russians" (p. 136).

Conclusion

What are the implications of the war in Ukraine for Buryatia and Buryats? First, the loss of lives will inevitably leave a mark on the region. Buryat activists and those in the diaspora are openly discussing the demographic consequences of the loss of many hundreds and potentially thousands of Buryat male lives—and what this means for the survival and continuity of the Buryat nation. Second, the war and the "partial mobilization" have resulted in substantial outmigration from Buryatia, as from elsewhere in Russia. Many have moved a few times since the "partial mobilization" took off in September 2022, for instance fleeing to Mongolia and then planning onward moves from there. Many have returned to Russia. Some of the main locations of the new Buryat diaspora are Mongolia, Kazakhstan, South Korea, and the US, although many have fled to different locations in Europe, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. While some simply plan to wait out their period of potential conscription, many more will not be returning to Buryatia: often, they have already built families, found new careers, and established themselves abroad. Third, the losses of lives and livelihoods have caused the accumulation of grievances in the region, which pile on top of grievances regarding other tragic periods of Buryat history in Russia. This has led some to formulate an oppositional political opinion or undertake activism, while others remain undecided about the causes and consequences of the losses and the war in general. A number of substantial Buryat movements have emerged in the diaspora: some looking for independence and others sup-

porting federalism, but all striving toward democracy. It is impossible to know how much support they might have in Buryatia itself, as the illiberal Russian regime does not allow for the existence of different political visions and debate. In such a climate, opinion polls or other estimations are inevitably flawed. What is clear, however, is that the current war constitutes a watershed moment in Buryat society that will shape Buryat identity and, with it, the future of the region.

About the Author
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