Ethnicity as a Resource for Anti-War Resistance
Indigenous Peoples of Russia and the Role of Ethnic Identity to Withstand Putin’s War

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ABSTRACT
Since 24 February 2022, about four ethnic minority groups have united around a call to stop the war: Buryats, Saha (Yakuts), Tuvans, Kalmyks and some representatives of Indigenous groups. Ethnic minorities in the country have started to question their association with Russia and to assert the old pain and struggle of their people. With the outbreak of the war, many non-ethnic Russians started projecting the multicultural identities to make themselves visible. The question is how has ethnicity become a resource for anti-war resistance? This commentary reflects on the ways in which ethnic identity is becoming the source of resilience and resistance against the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine. Reflections are based on the short stories published in the “voices of national minorities” by the society “Feminist Anti-War Resistance” on the Telegram channel in 2022 (Feminist Anti-War Resistance [FAS], 2022).

KEYWORDS
ethnicity, ethnic identity, Indigenous peoples of Russia, anti-war resistance, resilience.

Identity is a complex concept that explains, shapes and changes our life experiences and strategies. Often assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable, identity may become called into question when displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty (Mercer, 1994).

Identity can be a source of resistance to deprivation, differences and assimilation. The question posed in this commentary is what happens when identity becomes the source of anti-war resistance? In 2022 after the current Russian government started the total war invasion of Ukraine under the aegis of “denazification”, activists from ethnic minority groups began anti-war movements. Several ethnic anti-war communities have risen in Russia along with a surge of interest in the colonial and decolonial aspects of Russian history. People are reflecting on their past and present, starting to recognise themselves as not-Russians by
their nationality and seeking an opportunity to manifest their experience of being not-Russian. In this commentary, I reflect on the ways in which ethnic identity is becoming the source of resilience and resistance against the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine.

My reflections are based on the short stories published in the “voices of national minorities” by the society “Feminist Anti-war Resistance” on the Telegram channel in 2022 (Feminist Anti-War Resistance [FAS], 2022). Activists collected more than 40 personal stories written by women who currently live, or have lived, in Russia and identify themselves as Russian minorities (Indigenous ethnic groups that live in the Russian Federation as native-born). In these stories, they shared experiences of the ethnic discrimination they have faced. I select and translate some stories to show the shared pain of the Indigenous (non-Russian) Peoples of Russia. Their stories reveal a strong sense of being the Other. The trauma of discrimination has become a part of their ethnic identity, so it is not a wonder that ethnicity has become a resource for anti-war resistance.

**A Tatar woman**

24 May 2022

I am a Tatar, and my native language is Tatarian, which I spoke before I had turned six years old. I did not go to a kindergarten, and when I went to school, I knew that this language (Tatarian) was a rural one to be embarrassed to speak. The Russian language wiped out the differences (between nations) to make it ashamed. Turk languages of the republics were translated into Cyrillic and before had been translated to Latin. It made the Tatars learn their languages anew. They had been given new names with short patronymics to make them easier to pronounce. Radifa Ahmetgareevna became Raya Grigoryevna. I am not able to write in my native language, but I want to. I have not desired it before this moment. I thought why, if there is a beautiful Russian language? Let's remember how many cultures Russian culture has been cancelled instead of talking about cancelling Russian culture. Let's think about how we can change ourselves to help cultures return or be equal to Russian culture.

**A Bashkir woman**

26 May 2022

I was born in Bashkiria. I have been living in Siberia since early childhood. I knew that in my family were Tatars, Ukrainians, Russians and Mordovians. Once, I had a quarrel with classmates in middle school. It was the first time I heard personal insults related to my nationality. First, they paid attention to my Asian eye shape. They mocked and called me narrow-eyed, and sent me photos of Asians. They told me to go back to “my” Bashkiria. They told me you are Bashkir if you were born in Bashkiria and your parents are also Bashkirs. Later they sent me a long list of nationalities, saying that it was all me. One of them proudly claimed herself as a real
Russian. After this story, I felt frustrated due to my identity. I even wished to do eye plastic surgery. I wanted to look Russian and call myself Russian. After the beginning of the war, I started to study the process of Indigenous peoples’ languages vanishing. I knew that the eradication of Tatarian had been covered by the official policy of changing writing and the alphabet. As a result, native speakers were becoming ignorant. I want it to stop very much.

An Udmurt woman

26 May 2022

I am a quarter of Udmurt. My grandmother is an ethnic Udmurt. Her family comes from a Tatar-Udmurt village, but her parents spoke only Tatar and Russian and did not speak Udmurt. Their names were Russian, like those of their children, whom they introduced entirely to Russian culture. Although I have “non-Russian” traits, I have not been bullied because of my origin. But I am being asked the same question, “Are you sure you are Russian?” time and again. I feel neither Udmurt nor Russian because I do not know the culture of the Udmurt people and because I am ashamed to be Russian, and it disgusts me.

A Pomor woman

12 June 2022

I was born in the North, near the White Sea. There is snow for eight months of the year and arctic lights in the sky at night in my homeland. My mother used to say when dressing me up for school: “Kizha”—and pulled a hood over my head so that the snow would not quickly stick around my hat and scarf. I’m a Pomor. My people have more in common with the Scandinavians than with the Russians, although it is hard to distinguish one from another in appearance. Due to this, I have not faced discrimination based on appearance. Although an elementary school teacher once called me a ‘cod-eater’, this nickname stuck with me for many years. Since childhood, I have been fighting with my country for my identity. Pomors are an unrecognised nation. In 2012, the Russian Ministry of Justice liquidated a lone official community of Pomors. Once I pointed out my nationality as Pomor in some documents, but the officials changed it without asking. They said you could not be Pomor as you have a Slavic appearance. They said that our culture is Russian. They said we don’t have our language. They said it is easier to be identified as Russian in your ID. They said there is no such nation as Pomor.

A Buryat woman

21 June 2022

I am a Buryat. Russian society considers me and people like me to be second-class people. Neither I nor my ancestors lived a quiet life as equal people in my country. My
great-grandfather was judged under politically motivated law for pan-Mongolism and received ten years in a forced labour camp (GULAG) in Kolyma. My grandfather was bullied at school as “the son of an enemy of the Soviet nation”. I was called “narrow-eyed, Chinese” as a child. Once I was beaten to the point of blood by (Russian) kids. When I came to Moscow to study, I was regularly stopped by the police to check my documents. And how many times I failed to rent an apartment in Moscow (because of my non-Russian appearance) is hard to count. I always face such phrases as “Russia for Russians” written on the walls of buildings in my hometown, and utilities are in no hurry to wipe them out.

What do we see in these stories? What themes cut across these stories? A more important question might be, why have the authors felt compelled to share these stories?

Before the war, the discussion around nationality and ethnicity mostly had been avoided by either Russian or Indigenous peoples. There are no official days for remembering the genocides which almost every ethnic minority group has experienced in Russia during the deportation period of Stalin’s regime. There are no official heritage days or months. The culture, history, and contribution of ethnic groups are not recognised. There are no questions about nationality or ethnicity identification in opinion polls excluding cross-national surveys of Russia, but the ethnicity issue is not mandatory there.

On one hand, the official state discourses in Russia are still exoticising ethnic minority groups in the country; the government simply uses a “food and festival” approach to underline multinational and multicultural differences within Russia, which is home to about 180 ethnic groups. The discourse of the “souvenir identity” supports the fact that there are quotas for some ethnic minorities in Russia. Despite the idea of quotas as a necessary tool for the educational advancement of Indigenous groups, such tools require representatives of Indigenous groups to return back to their home community to work out the debt that a government gave them when paying for education.

On the other hand, ethnic diversity continues to be kept silent, with ethnic minority groups remaining underrepresented within government decision-making, and their role in civil rights movements continues to be overlooked. There is also a dearth of workforce data available showing ethnic and racial representation within Russian companies and organisations.

Thus, while there are approximately 200 ethnic groups in Russia, the issue of ethnic diversity receives little to no attention in the country. Over the course of the past decade, high levels of intolerance to immigrants have been registering in Russia. The Moscow-based analytical research organisation “Levada Centre” said that 71% of respondents in 2019 wanted to limit the number of foreign nationals living in Russia, a marked increase from the 54% of people who expressed this sentiment in 2017 (Pipiya, 2018). According to this survey, every second respondent agrees with the slogan “Russia is for Russians”. The report has its limits. First, it does not provide information about ethnic structure of the sample. Second, questions measure xenophobia regarding immigrants or particular ethnic groups, making it difficult to distinguish relationships between ethnic Russians and ethnic groups, who were born and live in one of the 20 ethnic republics in Russia, or who identify themselves as Indigenous peoples from 1 of the 47 ethnic minorities.
Russification language policies elevated Russian as a superior language (the Language Law was passed in 2018, making non-Russian languages elective) (Ramos, 2019). The ethnocentricity of the Russian majority takes the shape of colour-blindness and intolerance towards differences. For these reasons, the stories can only be understood in relation to the historical context of the country. Xenophobia, and the foregrounding of a particular idea about who is Russian, has come as the political instrument of Putin’s government to unite people around the idea of an external enemy (Sevortian, 2008, 2011). While the feeling of antipathy toward migrants has turned out to be a distinguishing feature of ethnic Russian people in cities and the countryside, such politics have triggered a growth of racism against people who were born and live in Russia but do not “look like” Russians. One of the noticeable signs of this intolerance are apartment rental advertisements with the mark “only for Slavic people” in big Russian cities especially in Moscow and in Saint Petersburg.

Since 24 February 2022 about four ethnic minority groups have united around a call to stop the war: Buryats, Saha (Yakuts), Tuvans, Kalmyks and some representatives of Indigenous groups. Ethnicity has since become a basis of anti-war resistance as a result of the overrepresentation of ethnic minorities in the Russian troop forces (Vorobyov, 2022). Such politics of military mobilisation provided by the current Russian government is an act of discrimination against ethnic minority groups within Russia on the basis of their ethnicity and the region of origin which together shape the intersectionality of discrimination. Activists underline their ethnic identity and vigorously criticise the actions of the current Russian government in Ukraine. The critique of unfair war has transformed into a critique of total and lasting discrimination and oppression of minority ethnic groups by the Russian majority, which amounts to about 80% of the total population. It is important to add that the ethnic identity of the Russian majority is not homogenous. The heritage of the Soviet period has left open questions about identity and belonging, due to efforts to cultivate the idea of the “Soviet man”, not an individual, but a human being who put the goals of the Soviet Nation first. This idea begs further investigation to examine the role of ethnicity in the identification process in contemporary Russian society and how it links with the high level of xenophobia and intolerance in Russia.

At the very beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, people who identify themselves as ethnic Russian (which does not mean only East Slavs of Slavic Nations, but all people who can call themselves Russians) have sensed increasing vulnerability concerning their national roots. Many of them describe their feelings as a loss of sense of belonging as a subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship with Russia. The others recognised a wish or even a reason to separate from Russian identity to find new identities, not only nation-based, which have been oppressed internally due to fear of being othered as minorities. In this sense, the anti-war resistance has become a significant continuation of the forgotten identities of people who live in Russia or have a relationship with the country.

The gallery of people with diverse identities dilutes the fully formed image of a Russian individual as dominant narrative of the Russian national identity. However, as ethnic minorities in the country have started to question their association with Russia and to assert the old pain and struggle of their folks (people), the image of Russians starts showing multivocal
and multicultural images of completely different people who have discovered the war to be an opportunity to rethink and to make themselves visible. The war has become an additional argument to say no to the national majority who involve them and force them to be at war, to share their natural resources and land, to be a colony for the Kremlin. People have started representing their ethnic experience and disclosing discrimination as being at the heart of their experience of living in Russia.

Not solving discrimination toward Indigenous people became a glass wall between the Russian majority, who still believe in the legend of “friendship of nations”, and ethnic minorities, who began recognising their ethnic identity through a history of suppression. Feelings of Indigenous peoples about their experiences of discrimination have not been accepted and heard by ethnic Russians, as these minority voices amplify the power of resistance and separation within Russia. Representatives of Indigenous peoples are making sharp commentaries on social media platforms. The leading tone of voice in these narratives reflects the pain that has yet to be fully recognised by the Russian majority:

“… Russian people only could kill and exterminate Indigenous people with its cultures and identities. There is a time to feel it on their skin …”

“… They (Russians) make us believe we do not have our own culture! It is not true! It is beneficial for the Kremlin that ethnic minorities do not know their roots …”

“… Can you remember that case in Saint Petersburg when a judge refused to recognise an ethnicity Tuvin? …”

The pain and the trauma of discrimination are the key traits of Indigenous people’s experience that they represent. Also, there is anger which focuses on the Russians as a cause of the pain. Together these feelings have become resources for resilience.

**Evenk women (the author)**

My study has a personal background. I am an Evenk. I was bullied at school because of my otherness. I was eroticised as an Asian woman. Thoughts that something was wrong with me were a part of my personality. I got my first university degree as an ethnic minority due to the quota education policy for Indigenous people in Russia. I have always been thinking, did I deserve to be at university? Is there merit to the selection processes in my case? Am I equal with my groupmates? Later I learned that quotas were only one way of bringing Indigenous people’s merit out into the open. But I still feel the pressure of being the best in a room to confirm to people around me that it was the right decision to give me a chance. I worked hard to become an educated, privileged person to leave the experience of being the other behind. And when I reached this goal, I noticed that nothing had happened. I realised that something needed to be changed in the world. Something wrong I wanted to fix was not about me but about the world.

While Putin is trying to project a vision of a homogenous “Russia” in the attack on Ukraine, the war is having the effect of surfacing the long-standing internal divisions,
painful experiences, and ethnic power relations. This consequence creates a choice about the path of resistance to take. The decolonial narrative enables a focus on the future and love for every culture of all peoples (Pillow, 2019), in contrast to the postcolonial perspective, where the past and trauma are at the centre of history. Choosing a decolonial approach involves a few crucial steps. First, the creation of space for healing trauma and relieving pain. Second, evaluation of the feelings of the Indigenous peoples of Russia to understand that our experiences do not cancel the experiences of dominant groups. Our feelings do not annul your feelings. This understanding is the ground for the dialogue, which is the third element of decolonial resistance. Thus, the potential of ethnic identity-based movements can serve as stepping stones to building cross-cultural and cross-ethnic coalitions aimed at disrupting and dismantling systems of injustice, power, and oppression in Russia.

REFERENCES