

History – 15-18 years

Student Resources



Activity Sheet: The Commonwealth of Independent States



Population displacement in the former Soviet Union

The collapse of the Soviet system was one of the most momentous events of the 20th century. It has not only altered the political geography of the world, but also created a host of new opportunities and challenges, both for the independent states and autonomous formations which have emerged, or re-emerged, from the Soviet empire, and also for the international community generally.

The post-Soviet landscape has yet to settle after this immense political earthquake, and there is still a great deal of tectonic movement. As the newly independent states seek to overcome the immense difficulties connected with state building, decolonization, economic dislocation and the transition to new political and economic systems, numerous ethnic conflicts and instances of extensive population displacement in various parts of this huge region attest to the continuing instability and dangerous potential for further upheaval and even greater crises.

Ethnic tensions and massive population movements are, however, not new to this part of the world. Indeed, more often than not, the roots of today's problems are to be found in the Soviet, and even tsarist, periods. Although the widespread misconception about the former Soviet Union as being synonymous with Russia tended to obscure the USSR's ethnic heterogeneity and the vitality of its non-Russian peoples, it was in fact the world's largest multinational state. Moreover, behind the facade of unity and the pretense that it was a harmonious new model society based on "free and equal partnership," the Soviet Union was also the last of the great empires and, for most of its history, a totalitarian one at that.

Territorially largely coterminous with the former Russian Empire, from which it was reconstituted by force, the Soviet empire spanned 11 time zones and stretched over 5,600 miles from the Baltic and Black Seas in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east. The USSR also inherited a complex "nationalities problem" from the Tsarist Empire which existed on two planes: the vertical, involving the relationship between the majority, and politically and culturally dominant, Russian nation and the non-Russians, many of whom had attempted to establish their own independent states; and the horizontal, that is, the tensions and disputes between some of the non-Russian peoples living next to one another, which were frequently aggravated by Moscow's divide-and-rule policies.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks knew that force alone would not suffice to weld together the fragmented former Russian "prison of nations," and they initially offered some concessions to national feeling designed to win over the loyalties of the non-Russians. The USSR was organized territorially along ethnic lines right down to the regional and local levels. In Central Asia, new ethnic republics were created to break up the unity of Turkestan (as most of Muslim Central Asia was known after its conquest in the 19th century by Russia). Here, and in the Caucasus, internal borders were frequently arbitrarily imposed.



In the highly centralized, supposedly federal, Soviet Union, which was run by the ruling unitary Communist Party, 15 of the major nationalities had their own nominally sovereign Union republics. But there were dozens of other ethnic groups in this multi-ethnic patchwork, both large and very small, which had their own autonomous state formations.

But what really distinguished the USSR from other empires, was that, from Lenin until Gorbachev, Soviet rulers sought to reforge individuals, peoples and society in accordance with their all-embracing chiliastic ideology. Their policies, involving massive economic transformation and social and cultural "engineering," brought economic and social progress. But, because they were achieved through terror and coercion, the policies also resulted in immense suffering, the loss of untold millions of lives, and the forced displacement of people on a scale that is hard to imagine. Peasants were driven into collective farms, the better-off ones being deported with their families to remote regions; forced labor was used to meet the increasing demands for manpower from the industrialization and regional development programs, and an enormous complex of forced labor camps - the infamous GULAG, was established; entire ethnic groups were deported to Siberia and Central Asia.

During World War II there was further massive loss of life, destruction and population displacement. After the war, large-scale deportation was used to facilitate the Sovietization of the newly acquired territories in the Baltic region, Western Ukraine and Moldova, and Russians were encouraged to settle in these areas. After Stalin's death in 1953, the use of political terror and forced labor was drastically reduced, and many, but by no means all, of the peoples and individuals who had been repressed and forcibly displaced were gradually allowed to return home.

Through its control of the political and economic levers, the Soviet imperial center, however, continued to find ways of inducing mass population flows, usually of Russians (and Russified Ukrainians and Belarusians), to non-Russian republics, for the purposes of promoting regional development, as it saw fit, and strengthening central control. In 1954, for example, Khrushchev ignored the protests of Kazakh Communist officials and launched his "Virgin Lands Scheme" in which hundreds of thousands of "volunteers" were sent to settle and cultivate the supposedly "idle" areas of Kazakhstan, where in fact the Kazakhs had traditionally bred livestock. Consequently, by 1959, the Kazakh share of the population in their own republic had fallen to under a third.

The Kazakhs were not the only ones to fear about their future. The migration of Russians and other Slavs continued into the Central Asian, Caucasian and Baltic republics, especially into the cities. The relatively small Latvian and Estonian nations eventually became especially anxious about their survival. The heavy flow of Russians into Ukraine also did not abate and by 1989 there were over 11.3 million of them in this republic, constituting 22 percent of the total population.



The Soviet government's stimulation of migration flows in the name of economic and political exigencies reinforced ethnic tensions in the republics. As it was, the leading role of the Russians and of their language and culture had been officially promoted from the Stalin period onwards, and the main thrust of Soviet nationalities policy in the post-Stalin period was to forge a "Soviet people" with a Russian cultural core. In this sense, the Russians, who themselves suffered considerably during the Soviet period, were a privileged people. While the non-Russians were pressured to learn and use Russian, very few of the Russian, or Russian-speaking migrants, bothered to learn the languages of non-Russian nationalities, even if they lived among them.

When, in the Brezhnev period, the Soviet command economy began to show increasing signs of stagnation, changes in demographic trends also added to the Soviet leadership's sense of impending crisis. The birthrate of the Russians and other Slavs was declining, while that of the unassimilable Central Asian peoples remained high, giving rise to psychological and political fears, and complicating matters for Soviet central planners and the generals. Furthermore, as the traditionally Muslim Central Asia peoples began to reap the benefits of modernization policies and of affirmative action programs, they grew more assertive, and Russian and other migrants began to leave. In 1979, Soviet concern about the "Muslim" demographic time bomb, the possible spread of Islamic fundamentalism and the security of the USSR's southern borders, were factors behind the decision to invade Afghanistan.

During the next decade, there was a complete reversal of the North-South migration pattern - that is of Slavic migrants moving to the Central Asian republics and the Caucasus - and hundreds of thousands of persons left Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and other southern republics.

The scale and acuteness of the "nationalities question," which had long been officially proclaimed as "solved," became apparent almost as soon as Gorbachev embarked on his course of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Designed to revamp and not dismantle the Soviet system, these policies nevertheless led away from totalitarianism and empire. With the relaxation of controls, problems which had been suppressed or concealed suddenly came to the fore.

The first major tremor was felt in December 1986 when Kazakhs rioted after Moscow appointed a Russian as the new Party boss in Kazakhstan. During the early phase of *glasnost*, however, the only major displacement of population was caused in April 1986 by the world's worst nuclear accident at the Chernobyl atomic power station north of the Ukrainian capital, Kiev. But within two years, the ethnic conflicts that were accumulating as a result of the Soviet leadership's continuing reluctance to address the nationalities problem began producing hemorrhaging of refugees and displaced persons.

In early 1988, the long smoldering problem of Nagorno-Karabakh, (the predominantly Armenian enclave which Moscow had placed under Azerbaijan's



jurisdiction in the 1920s) suddenly flared up. As a result of the ethnic strife an estimated 500,000 Armenians and Azerbaijanis fled in opposite directions, from Azerbaijan to Armenia, and vice versa. The following summer, communal violence erupted in the Fergana Valley in Central Asia and over 60,000 Meskhetian Turks - one of the deported peoples - were driven out of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

As the center began to lose control, the daunting scale of the difficulties facing the Soviet leadership in trying to hold its crumbling empire together was also revealed in the last Soviet census, which was carried out in 1989. It emerged that the Russians now barely accounted for 50 percent of the population of 285 million. Far from eradicating national consciousness, Soviet policies had in fact had the opposite effect: the entire trend continued to be in the direction of the concentration of most nationalities in their own areas and their greater assertiveness. National feeling and assertiveness were on the rise throughout the USSR, and the non-Russians from Moldova and the Baltic republics to Central Asia were beginning to pass laws aimed at upgrading and bolstering the status of their native languages - in other words, counteracting the effects of Russification.

The census also exposed the extent of the displacement and intermixing of peoples that had taken place and how huge was the number of people who now risked being considered aliens, or even colonizers, in others' homelands. About one-fifth of the Soviet population - between 54 million and 65 million people, depending on what definition of a homeland was used - lived outside their national units. Of these, 25.3 million were Russians, who were also the only group to enjoy cultural facilities in their own language outside their own republic and who could, until now, at least, feel at home in any part of the Soviet Union.

Impatient with the Kremlin, the non-Russians raised the standards of national self-determination and sovereignty and sought to build, or renew, their own independent states. The Russians themselves were gradually affected by the virus of largely democratic nationalism. With Boris Yeltsin and other reformist leaders taking up the cause of affirming Russia's sovereignty, the imperial center split and lost its resolve. After a botched attempted putsch in August 1991 by Communist Party diehards who wanted to preserve the old order, the compromise solution of a loose non-state voluntary association, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), to replace the USSR, was finally forced on Gorbachev and the reluctant center in December 1991 by the joint action of the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

Because the collapse of the Soviet Union took the form - on the whole - of a remarkably peaceful and orderly process of dissolution, and was generally greeted with hope in the newly independent states, including Russia, as the beginning of a new age, there was no flood of refugees to the outside world.

All too soon, though, it became apparent how difficult it was to overcome the legacy of 70 years of Soviet rule and that democratic and economic transformation was going to be a highly complex and painful process that could not be rushed. The newly independent states also began to act as sovereign entities, seeking to



reaffirm the national identity of the titular nation, to safeguard their territorial integrity and, in some cases, to change existing borders.

Because many of the borders had been arbitrarily demarcated in the past and populations had been intermixed, this has frequently spelled trouble. Apart from the obvious case of Armenia's unresolved dispute with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which soon developed into open war between the two states, there are other examples of friction and conflict. In fact, the first outbreak of ethnic violence on the territory of the Russian Federation itself occurred in late October 1992 in the North Caucasus when tens of thousands of Ingush were driven out of the disputed Prigorodny district in North Ossetia by Ossetians. Prior to their deportation in 1944, the area had belonged to the Ingush.

Elsewhere, relations between Russia and Ukraine have been strained by, among other issues, the future of the Crimean peninsula and the former Soviet Black Sea Fleet based there. The Crimean Tatars had been deported from Crimea in 1944, and Russian settlers had moved in; yet, in 1954 the peninsula, with its Ukrainian minority, was transferred from the Russian Federation to Ukraine by Khrushchev. Among other examples of border disputes are those between Estonia and Russia, Lithuania and Belarus, Russia and Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

All of the independent countries which emerged as a result of the disintegration of the USSR, including Russia, are to a greater or lesser extent themselves multi-ethnic states and now have to deal with integrating national minorities and reducing centrifugal tendencies.

In Estonia and Latvia, citizenship and other laws have been passed which are implicitly aimed at halting immigration into these states and encouraging the "repatriation" of Russians. Because the laws in effect temporarily disenfranchise much of the non-indigenous population, they have been condemned as discriminatory by the Slavic minorities and Russia, which has assumed the role of a vocal protector of the rights of Russians and Russian-speakers now suddenly living "abroad." In Ukraine, however, where the bulk of the Russians living outside of Russia are settled, analogous laws have been carefully crafted to integrate, and not alienate, the national minorities. Kiev is asking for similar treatment for several million Ukrainians living in Russia and other newly independent states.

In Georgia and in Moldova, problems over the rights of national minorities have led to armed conflicts and large-scale population displacement. In 1991, fighting broke out between the Georgians and the Ossetian minority, and the following year, between the Georgians and the Abkhaz. In Moldova, armed conflict erupted in 1992 after the Russian-dominated Transdniestrian enclave (whose leaders had been opposed to the dissolution of the USSR) sought to break away.

One of the most serious conflicts since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been in Tajikistan, where in 1992 a civil war broke out. Hundreds of thousands of Tajik



refugees fled to Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Because of the intermixture of ethnic groups (for instance, neighboring Uzbekistan, the most populous of the Central Asian states, has 950,000 Tajiks and 850,000 Kazakhs, while about 2.5 million Uzbeks live outside of Uzbekistan, half of them in Tajikistan), Tajikistan's porous border with Afghanistan, and the fear of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, the conflict in Tajikistan has major implications for the entire sub-region.

Hardly surprisingly, since the collapse of the USSR, the spontaneous outflow of Russians and Russian-speakers to Russia from the former Soviet republics which have now become "foreign countries," has greatly intensified. It is estimated that since 1989 over 2 million people have moved to Russia for a variety of reasons: to escape conflict, because they perceive themselves as victims of actual or potential persecution or discrimination - the Russian authorities have designated these two categories of displaced Russian-speakers as "forced migrants" - or for economic motives.

Roughly a quarter of the people who have moved to Russia since 1989 have been recognized as either refugees or forced migrants, the largest percentage coming from Tajikistan (over 25 percent), Georgia (19 percent), Azerbaijan (16 percent) and other Central Asian states, with a relatively low percentage of about 1.5 percent coming from Latvia and Estonia. The North Caucasian republic of Chechnya, which has attempted to break away from Russia, and the conflict between the Ingush and Ossetians have also produced tens of thousands of internally displaced and "forced migrants."

This, in addition to the problems of accommodating the tens of thousands of former Soviet military personnel withdrawn from Central and Eastern Europe and the newly independent states, as well as the movement of internal economic migrants away from remote former secret military production sites and artificial cities located in inhospitable regions in the North, Siberia and the Far East, has placed an enormous strain on the Russian Federation and is exacerbating social tensions.

The exodus of the Russian-speaking population from Central Asia is also hurting local economies and social services because it is depriving the sub-region of skilled personnel with badly needed professional and industrial skills, such as doctors, teachers and engineers. In several of the Central Asian states, the problem has become so serious that efforts have been made by the authorities to reassure the Slavic population in order to stem the outflow.

All of the newly independent states have also been faced with the acute and growing problems of asylum-seekers and illegal and transit migrants from outside the former Soviet region. None of them have the resources and institutional capacity to deal effectively with the problems associated with population movements, and some Russian authorities have even begun arguing that the Russian Federation is unable to fulfil the obligations it undertook when, in 1992, it acceded to the 1951 Convention on Refugees.



In 1994, UNHCR knew of over 60,000 people in Russia from outside the CIS and Baltic states who were claiming to be refugees. Almost half of them came from Afghanistan, the other large groups being from Somalia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Angola, China, Ethiopia and Zaire. The number of illegal migrants, many of them in transit westward, is believed to be considerably higher, perhaps as much as half a million. An estimated 150,000 Chinese alone are believed to have entered Russia illegally.

The complex refugee and displacement problems on the territory of the former Soviet Union have led UNHCR and other U.N. agencies and international humanitarian organizations to become involved in a part of the world where until recently they had been absent. Since 1991, UNHCR has established a presence in Moscow and several other countries of the CIS and has been active in addressing refugee-related problems. In Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Tajikistan it has provided humanitarian assistance and protection to tens of thousands of the displaced and endeavored to promote repatriation under conditions of security and safety. Through advice, training and technical assistance, UNHCR has also helped the newly independent countries in the region begin building an institutional capacity to deal with refugees and migrants.

Clearly, this is only a start and much more needs to be done in a more imaginative, concerted and comprehensive manner to deal effectively with existing and potential problems associated with the large-scale displacement of people. Today, the entire post-Soviet set-up is still latently unstable. There is no shortage of existing conflicts and flashpoints. Much will depend on Russia - the major regional power, whose forces are already playing a role in Tajikistan and Georgia - and on the direction in which it will develop. But much could also depend on whether the international community and the United Nations system recognize the challenges, dangers and opportunities which this volatile region presents and take timely, broad-ranging preventive action to help stabilize conditions, manage conflict, and thereby reduce the risks of future extensive internal and external displacement.

Bohdan Nahaylo
UNHCR senior advisor on the CIS & Baltic states.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Office of the Representative for the United Kingdom
21st Floor, Millbank Tower, 21-24 Millbank, London SW1P 4QP
Tel: 020 7828 9191, Fax: 020 7630 5349,
E-mail: gbrlo@unhcr.ch, Website: <http://www.unhcr.ch>

