

'Diaspora'? The Case of the Russians of Central Asia

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In this article I intend to explore the term diaspora and whether or not it is an adequate term to use when referring to the Russian communities remaining in Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and also the returning Russian migrant communities from the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia. Ultimately I intend to argue that these communities do not fit the term diaspora in all senses of the term. Firstly I intend to discuss the term diaspora itself exploring arguments by different academics on the concept. Secondly I intend to apply the concept of diaspora to these two groups of Russians using various different English secondary sources, and also some Russian academic literature to attempt to compensate for my western perspective.

Diaspora is a contentious term and has inspired a wide range of academic literature on the subject. At the most basic level the word is made up of the preposition 'dia' meaning 'over' and the verb 'speiro' meaning 'to sow'. [1] Diaspora has most extensively been used when referring to the Jewish people, and other peoples that have experienced 'a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile.' [2] There are several themes which are apparent within the concept of diaspora, this sense of removal from a homeland being one of them. Hall's interpretation of the term in 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' explores themes of cultural identity specifically among Afro-Caribbean diasporas in the West, but his reflections provide useful general themes that tend to be apparent within in any diaspora. He suggests that diaspora communities experience "cultural identity" in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. [3] Floya Anthias similarly argues: "Diaspora" references a connection between groups across different nation states whose commonality derives from an original but maybe removed homeland; a new identity becomes constructed on a world scale which crosses national borders and boundaries. [4] Cohen perhaps provides the most extensive description of diasporas, dividing the key themes that they exhibit into nine distinct sections:

- 'dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically;
- alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions;
- a collective memory and myth about the homeland;
- an idealisation of the supposed ancestral home;
- a return movement;
- a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time;
- a troubled relationship with host societies;
- a sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members in other host societies;
- the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries.' [5]

The first two themes of dispersal (traumatic or otherwise) are explained as flight from an original country due to perhaps 'wars, ethnic cleansing, natural disasters, pogroms,' [6] but equally in the contemporary period, as Brazil notes, as much due to 'the discordant flows of globalisation' [7]; migrants often move to different countries in search of work, or in the past they were sent on the motivation of colonisation. The collective memory and myth about homeland is strongly linked with Cohen's fourth point about the idealisation of the supposed ancestral home and it is something that is shared by all diaspora communities, it 'acts to 'root' a diasporic consciousness and give it legitimacy.' [8] The return movement is explained by the 'current condition of the diaspora and its imagined past

‘Diaspora’? The Case of the Russians of Central Asia

Written by anon

[being] resolved by actual return or help given to return movements by the diaspora.’[9] The strong ethnic consciousness sustained over a long time is explained partially by the estrangement of the migrant communities which is perpetuated by continued use of mother tongues and ‘self-familiarising practices’ which set them apart from the titular nation.[10] A troubled relationship with the host societies is often exacerbated by this estrangement.[11] The sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members in other host societies is equally inspired by the estrangement the diaspora community feels in its host society, as Cohen points out the ‘bond of loyalty to the country of refuge or settlement competes with ethnic solidarity’.[12] The possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries is an obvious possibility for the diaspora community; ‘even victim diasporas find their experiences in modern nation-states enriching and creative as well as enervating and fearful.’[13] It is Cohen’s division of the key themes of diasporas that I plan to apply to returning Russian communities from the former Soviet Republics and the Russian communities in Central Asia.

For most of the 20th century there was net out-migration from central Russia to the peripheries, and this was only reversed by 1975 with migration back to Russia until 1991 averaged about 100,000.[14] It may seem that upon first glance that the returning Russians and the remaining Russian communities in Central Asia fit neatly into the first two themes proposed by Cohen for defining a diaspora, namely those of dispersal from a homeland, traumatic or expansion in search of work. But the nature of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union makes this problematic; yes ‘these settler communities sprang up in the course of centuries-long colonization by the Russian/Soviet state of every near and distant corner of its imperial periphery.’[15] But as Flynn points out ‘the original migration from core to periphery involved no crossing of state borders and thus migration was not only legally and politically defined as internal migration but was psychologically experienced as such.’[16] Thus while arguably these could be seen as colonial actions, defining either of these groups as diasporas is problematic from the outset, as the ‘migration’ of these Russians was not even considered migration at all, but merely moving within the confines of one’s own country. Equally the Laura Adam’s work on postcolonial theory in Central Asia demonstrates that the nature of ‘colonialism’ in the Soviet Union was itself unique and differed greatly from say the colonialism of Britain or France, which again makes it difficult to apply the theories on diaspora which refer to largely traditional forms of colonialism.[17]

Points three and four of Cohen’s concept of diaspora (namely ‘a collective memory and myth about the homeland’ and ‘an idealisation of the supposed ancestral home’) provide perhaps the most important point of referral when considering whether or not these communities fit the diaspora model. Generally most academic literature on the subject of diaspora and these Russian communities illustrate how they all fail to see the Russian Federation as their homeland. Barrington et al. point out that ‘surprisingly few Russians living outside the Russian Federation consider Russia to be their homeland: *fewer than one-quarter of the ethnic Russian respondents in the four states offered Russia as their homeland.*’[18] (Emphasis in the original) In fact they go on to point out that in reality many of the Russians interviewed experienced different types of homeland, sometimes even multiple versions of homeland with Russia often not featuring as the main homeland.[19] Similarly Poppe and Hagendoorn found that many of the Russians interviewed in Central Asia lacked a cohesive Russian identity, and actually identified more as Soviet, which is probably due to the fact that Russian ethnic identity was ‘less prominent than the supra-national Soviet identity’ during the Soviet period.[20] They go on to point out that in surveys conducted during the Soviet period most Russians referred to the Soviet Union as their homeland rather than Russia, which suggests that is less likely for them to identify with Russia as their homeland since the collapse of communism.[21] Russian academics have come to similar conclusions; Lebedeva in her research on Russian communities in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan found what she called ‘a crisis of social identity’ among Russians living there leading to a ‘crisis of civil identity’:

‘The majority of Russians interviewed by us could not define themselves with the choice of citizenship and experienced dissatisfaction with the already accepted citizenship of Kazakhstan.’[22] (My translation)

This stands in sharp contrast from Cohen’s concept of diaspora communities that clearly see what constitutes their homeland, and idealise and strive towards it.

Academic research on Russian communities returning from the former Soviet republics has found similar levels of dissatisfaction the concept of Russia as a homeland. As Poppe and Hagendoorn found, Flynn has also found in her research on returning Russians that several concepts of home can exist for Russians, her research displays a

‘Diaspora’? The Case of the Russians of Central Asia

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particularly interesting side of this in the language of the Russians she interviewed. Russians divided home between *dom* (at home) and *rodina* (homeland). What is interesting in this are the roots of the words linguistically and how they were applied to different areas; *dom* means home or house, and *rodina* comes from *rod* meaning family/kin/birth/origin. Returning Russians tended to relate *rodina* to their former republic;

‘they spoke about *rodina* not just as the territory where they were born, but where their roots were located – the place where their parents were born, to where their ancestors had arrived. In this sense the former republic was quite explicitly the land of their kin, their people (*rod-dina*)’[23]

Interestingly this frames these returning Russian migrants almost as a diaspora within the Russian Federation itself, rather than the returning members of a Russian diaspora from a former Soviet republic, because they have a perception of ‘homeland’ which is their former place of residence. Again Russian academic research has supported the fact that these Russians do not consider the Russian Federation their homeland, at least not exclusively; Filipova, in much the same way as Lebedeva, notes that there are ‘serious psychological issues apparent in Russians who are returning to Russian from the former republics since the collapse of the USSR’.[24] (My translation) As Flynn found, Filipova argues that ‘many [Russians], especially older people, were sad that they had had to leave:

“The Uzbeks really respected the Russians, and we got on well till the start of the 90s. They are generally a good people, kind. It’s a shame that it turned out this way.” (Woman, 50 years of age).’[25] (My translation)

Again there is an idealisation of the ‘homeland’ that they have left, which does not represent a returning diaspora to its ethnic homeland, in fact in some ways it seems again as though this group is some kind of diaspora in Russia itself. So in this respect neither of the groups fit Cohen’s criteria to be considered a diaspora.

Cohen’s fifth point, that of a return movement, is more complicated in considering these groups of Russians. There was most definitely a return movement among these Russian communities, as exemplified by the Russian government’s actions following the collapse of the Soviet Union; in 1992 Yeltsin’s government set up the Federal Migration Service, and legislation on ‘forced migrants’ and ‘refugees’ followed in 1993, which stated that ‘all former residents of the Soviet Union, were entitled to Russian citizenship, which remained in force until May 2002.’[26] While officially 1.5 million people were registered as forced migrants from 1992-2002, ‘it is estimated that around 8-10 million individuals have actually made the journey from the former republics and come to reside within the borders of the Russian Federation.’[27] So in this respect Russian communities returning from the former republics do fit Cohen’s criteria to be considered a diaspora; clearly many migrants did return from these former republics. However, as explored in the section relating to homeland, many of these Russians did not return as Lebedeva points out in her research while many of those interviewed may have expressed a desire to leave, only about 20-25% of those actually realised this objective.[28] While some moved for economic reasons, many stayed as the ‘the situation in most of the NIS ... substantially improved due to economic growth under market reforms’.[29]

The sixth point of Cohen’s criteria for being considered a diaspora, that of a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time, has in some respects been addressed in the section dealing with homeland. As previously mentioned Russians returning to the Russian Federation from the former Soviet republics, and Russians remaining in Central Asia, identify more closely with a Soviet civic identity than a Russian ethnic identity.[30] Pilkington points out in her research that this can be another way in which Russians in Central Asian, and Russians returning from the former republics, are differentiated from Russians in the Russian Federation;

‘A recurrent theme of self-identification might loosely be labelled a ‘Soviet work ethic.’ It is rooted in a long standing belief that it was the ‘brightest and best’ who had been sent to the non-Russian republics to raise the cultural and economic level of the backwards parts of the Soviet Union.’[31]

This sense of being Soviet and working harder and better than those in Russia is an example of a strong group consciousness among both groups; however it is not an ethnic but civic consciousness. Similarly it does not bring these two groups closer to their ethnic brethren but actually distances them from them; ‘locals in Russia ... are seen as drunkard, layabouts and as having failed to improve their standard of living.’[32] Similarly Russians from the

‘Diaspora’? The Case of the Russians of Central Asia

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communities that receive the returning Russians refuse to recognise them as ethnic Russians labelling them as ‘Kazakhi’ and ‘Kyrgyzi’.[33] Equally many Russians from both these groups do in fact relate to the titular culture more strongly than that of their own Russian culture; Filipova states that in her research she found that many of the Russians that returned from the former republics had adopted many of the native cultural activities or ways of living and continued to use them after returning to Russia; ‘as we were fortunate to observe, those who had left Central Asia try to save their systems of diets in new conditions’[34] (My translation). She observed that many of them continued to make traditional Kazakh dishes such as ‘plov’ and ‘manta’, and that many had books by ‘titular’ authors in Russian translation.[35] This sense of civic group consciousness and close relationship with the titular nation is also relevant to Cohen’s eighth point; a sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members in other host societies. The same problem applies here in that these Russians do not emphasise the ethnic part of their identity, but the civic part, exemplified by their preference to identify as Soviet rather than Russian. Also the close relationship and integration with the titular nation suggests a lack of awareness of co-ethnic members in other countries. In fact Poppe and Hagendoorn go as far as to suggest that ‘among those Russians who are already tending to titular identification, a threat of intervention from outside the republic triggers a stronger titular identification.’[36] This greater integration with the titular culture and general distancing from their own ethnic culture means that in this sense they both fail to fit both Cohen’s sixth point and his eighth for being considered a diaspora.

Cohen’s seventh and ninth point, that of a troubled relationship with host societies and the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries, are apparent for both groups in some respects. As Flynn points out ‘since independence in 1991, there have been conscious attempts by the Uzbek state to develop an Uzbek national identity based around Uzbek nationalism and the idea of a core Uzbek *ethnos*, its history, culture, and language.’[37] As with any form of nationalism, ethnic minorities are often alienated by its rise and can frequently become scapegoats for nationalist tension. Indeed Flynn points out that this rise in nationalism in many of the former Soviet republics prompted them to move;

‘A growing sense of “ethnic discomfort” was articulated by respondents through reference to the disruption of the security of everyday life, which had made this place “home.” Respondents felt victims of discrimination on the basis of language and nationality in the spheres of employment and education.’[38]

And yet those who did leave these former republics and came to Russia did not find that discrimination had evaporated, as previously mentioned, and did not feel welcome in their ‘homeland’ leading them to be labelled as ‘other’ Russians as described by Flynn, Pilkington and Kosmarskaya. However many Russians who did remain in the former republics did not complain of ethnic discrimination; ‘[They] rarely suggested that it was a specifically anti-Russian initiative.’[39] Lebedeva’s research shows that many Russians who remained in Central Asia also counted many of the titular population among friends and family.[40] This suggests that while some Russians did experience a troubled relationship with their host society, they experienced similar discomfort in their supposed homeland, and at the same time of those who did remain many do in fact have the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries, meaning that in some respects Cohen’s criteria fit, and in others they do not.

A point which Cohen does not raise but is relevant in this case is the explicit diasporisation of a community by a government pertaining to be its homeland. As Flynn points out:

‘The Russian-speaking communities in the former republics have been the object of “diasporisation.” The newly independent Russian government sought to exercise Russia’s great-power status in the “near abroad” through a discursive reconfiguration of the borders of post-Soviet Russia according to the geographical location of the Russian *ethnos*, rather than the current administrative borders of the Russian state.’[41]

It is clear that given the previous discussion of these communities that they are not diasporas but are the subject of a ‘diasporisation’ campaign by the Russian Federation in order to achieve certain foreign policy objectives. Kosmarskaya also suggests that these communities have been ‘diasporised’ in order to achieve certain objectives, not by the Russian state but by ‘factions of the political opposition, especially those of nationalistic and patriotic orientation, together with publicists and journalists popularizing their ideas.’[42] Whatever the case, what is important is that these communities have been the subject of ‘diasporisation’, again undermining their qualification for

‘Diaspora’? The Case of the Russians of Central Asia

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consideration as diasporas.

In conclusion it is clear that both Russians living in Central Asia and Russians returning to the Russian Federation cannot be considered to be diasporas. They fail to exhibit many of the key themes that Cohen sets out as being the main features of diasporas; the dispersal of Russians fails to adhere to the traditional methods of dispersal, those for traumatic reasons or economic reasons, furthermore the supposed ‘migration’ cannot be considered migration as it crossed no physical borders. Their perceived homeland is rarely, if ever, Russia, and they frequently adhere to a civic sense of identity rooted in a Soviet past rather than a contemporary Russian ethnic identity. Indeed many of them in fact idealise the post-Soviet republic as their homeland rather than Russia. While there has of course been a return movement many have chosen to remain in Central Asia, and those that have left idealise the homeland they have left behind. The strong ethnic group consciousness to which Cohen refers is similarly confused, as the choice of identifying with a sense of being Soviet rather than Russian suggests a civic rather than ethnic identity, this in turn undermines the sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members in other host societies as the ethnic sense of identity is simply lacking or undermined by the sense of being Soviet. The troubled relationship with host societies and the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries which Cohen describes are apparent to some extent in these groups, however it is also apparent that for many of those who remained in Central Asia that they live there without problem, and for many of those who returned, life in their homeland is hardly without hardship or discrimination. Finally it is clear that both of these groups have been the subject of a process of artificial ‘diasporisation’ by the Russian Federation which suggests again that they are not diasporas.

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‘Diaspora’? The Case of the Russians of Central Asia

Written by anon

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'Diaspora'? The Case of the Russians of Central Asia

Written by anon

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‘Diaspora’? The Case of the Russians of Central Asia

Written by anon

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