# Russification and Russianization in Modern Historiography: Recent Developments and Future Directions

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**Abstract**

As the Soviet historical archives became accessible to Western scholars beginning in the 1980s, renewed scrutiny was placed on the imperial-colonial policies of the Russian Empire toward its borderlands. These scholars began to interrogate the policies of the imperial administration toward ethnic and national groups in the borderlands from the imperial administrative perspective. In this essay, I geographically circumnavigate the borderlands of the Russian Empire through secondary studies published since the 1980s to understand how scholars have reinterpreted these policies since gaining access to the imperial administrative perspective. I find that they began to challenge the notion that the empire had cohesive and consistently applied policies to Russify its subjects. Instead, scholars now generally argue that policies were applied on a more *ad hoc* basis depending on the ethnic and national contexts of individual borderlands. Consequently, the concept of 'Russification' (*obrusenie* in Russian) became opaque, difficult to define, and inadequate in capturing the range of imperial policies toward the peoples of the borderlands. Therefore, the application of the term 'Russianization' is now more popular among scholars in describing non-assimilatory policies. Further distinction between the two concepts, however, is required in order to understand the full range of policies enacted toward imperial ethnicities and nationalities. Therefore, I also argue in favor of two promising new frameworks in the historiography, namely, the shifting usage of the term *inorodtsy* (aliens) by imperial administrators over time, and the concept of national indifference. Study of the former, I contend, would highlight the "othering" of non-dominant ethnic and national minorities. The latter permits an understanding of the limits of national constructions, thereby enabling a greater understanding of processes of national construction and, therefore, imperial responses to those constructions. Both would ultimately further clarify the historiographic distinction between Russification and Russianization.

## Introduction

The challenges and questions of the present often inform historical scholarship. Following this principle, scholars of imperial Russia's borderland territories will likely

initiate new studies in the coming years due to Vladimir Putin's invasion of neighboring Ukraine. Indeed, Putinism bears many of the hallmarks of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century imperialism in the Russian empire, a reality that is inspiring renewed scholarly interest in the region. This resharpened focus on Russian imperial-colonial policies in its historical borderlands invites a look back at the recent scholarship on this subject.

Prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, studies of nationality within these borderlands generally fell into two distinct historiographical schools. The first mainly comprised of authors from the modern nation-states that emerged out of the borderland territories following the First World War. This scholarship tended to focus on nineteenth-century ethno-national movements and their responses to imperial policies rather than the imperial administration itself. Studies of this type are numerous in the historiography of each individual borderland territory, due in part to the focus on nation-states in the twentieth century, and also due to the dearth of Russian archival sources during this period. In many ways, then, the scholars working in this vein acted as representatives of local ethnonational traditions, and their respective histories tended to highlight the development and spread of local national character despite imperial rule.

On the other hand, Western historical studies and those originating from within Russia itself did not focus much on imperial nationality policies. Instead, these scholars concerned themselves with Russian narratives about the empire and its borderlands rather than the ethnonationalities on the empire's fringes, thus contributing to popular contemporary perceptions of the imperial state as a despotic Russian monolith. As access to Russian state archives in the lead-up to and following the dissolution of the Soviet Union gradually increased, however, these frames of interpretation started to shift. Beginning in the first half of the 1980s, nationality within the Russian empire gained greater prominence in western scholarship as the prospect of independence for these ethnonationalities grew. Local, western, and Russian historians began to study imperial policies, thereby developing several new historiographical themes and currents in the process.[1]

In this essay, I trace the convergence of these two historiographical schools following renewed access to the archives beginning in the 1980s. I identify similarities and differences in how scholars depict the construction of national and imperial identities throughout the borderlands after 1863-1864 when an uprising in the Polish territories supercharged imperial nationality policies in peripheral regions. Through the works chosen, I seek to geographically circumnavigate the major borderlands of the Russian Empire, specifically through studies of the Northern borderlands (Finland), the Northwestern borderlands (Lithuania and Belarus), the Central Asian Borderlands (Uzbekistan), the Southwestern borderlands (Ukraine and Poland), and the Far Eastern borderlands (Siberia and The Amur region). I pay particularly close attention to scholars'

[1] The late Mark von Hagen's discussion on whether Ukraine has one definite historical narrative upon which to base its national identity provides a good example of the historiographical shift toward studying local national movements in imperial contexts and an overview of how scholars began to approach nationalism in Eastern and Central Europe from new perspectives after the fall of the Soviet Union. See Mark von Hagen, "Does Ukraine Have a History?" *Slavic Review* 54, no. 3 (1995): 658–73.

conclusions about processes of imperial identity construction despite studying different borderlands, their insights about the goals and policies of imperial administrators throughout the borderlands as well as the frameworks and methodologies scholars use in their analyses. I find that, over time, scholars identified two distinct processes for the construction of imperial identities: Russification, which can be understood in general terms as the assimilation of a non-dominant ethnic group, and Russianization, which can be understood as the acculturation and or/integration of a non-dominant ethnic group. Finally, considering the renewed relevance of these historical questions given recent events in Ukraine and the impending possibility of further Russian expansion into other imperial borderlands, I also consider promising new directions and frameworks for the future study of these questions with the hope that they may contribute fresh insights into the past and present Russian Empire.

**Russification or Russianization?**

A substantial difficulty faced by western historians of the Russian Empire before 1991 (and now again after February 2022) was the general inaccessibility of Russian archival material, particularly before the implementation of *Glasnost* by Mikhail Gorbachev in the latter half of the 1980s. In his discussion on the impact of the archives on contemporary scholarship, historian Donald Raleigh noted that he was only able to gain access to the Central State Archive of the October Revolution and Socialist Construction (TsGAOR, today GARF) in 1986.[2] Even when he gained access, Raleigh remarked, "The terms of admission imposed from above also put me on edge. For one thing, I was shown—and then only after frustrating delays—a mere twenty archival files (*dela*). I could not consult archival inventories (*opisi*) or catalogs, discuss my research with archivists willing to help, or inspect files in the same building in which our Soviet colleagues conducted their research."[3] Clearly, Soviet archival authorities were highly protective of their materials and conscious of the potential impacts that Western use of them could have.

The publication of Tuomo Polvinen's *Imperial Borderland*, one of the first monographs written outside of the Soviet Union to make extensive use of the heavily guarded archives and analyze imperial policy from the Russian perspective rather than from the perspective of local sources, thus marked the first step in a new historiographic direction. First published in Finnish in 1984 and then translated to English in 1995 by Steven Huxley, the author could access and use documents in the archives of Moscow, Leningrad, and St. Petersburg years before Raleigh's visit. Archival research in the Soviet Union was an essential undertaking in the author's goal to "clarify *Russia's* policy on Finland" because it is the main source type missing from the Russian general and historian M.M. Borodkin's 1905 history of Finland under Governor-General N.I. Bobrikov. Borodkin's work was clearly a major source of inspiration for Polvinen's project, given that no other work had been centered on the perspective of Bobrikov, who, as Governor-General, was

[2] Donald Raleigh, "Doing Soviet History: The Impact of the Archival Revolution," *The Russian Review (Stanford)* 61, no. 1 (2002), 16.
[3] Ibid.

responsible for implementing tsarist policies that sought to suppress Finnish autonomy.[4] The influence of the imperial policies themselves on this historiography is emphasized by the fact that, despite writing roughly 80 years apart, both Borodkin and Polvinen choose to interrogate them from the point of view of the man most responsible for their implementation. Indeed, Polvinen making Bobrikov his main character was an excellent choice expressly because he had access to the archives. This combination of structure and evidence allowed for a much more nuanced understanding of imperial policy toward the Finnish people than previously conceived.

Though this work only became accessible to non-Finnish speakers once translated to English after the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of its archives to the world, Polvinen's intervention nonetheless marks an important step forward. Indeed, the English translation of the book was an important factor in the development of this historiography (a testament to the necessity of translational work in the field of historical research) as several Western historians had begun to ponder these same questions in the decade prior without access to Polvinen's work. Thus, *Imperial Borderland* highlights the importance of archival material as the way that historians craft narratives of the past. As a result, virtually no monograph on imperial Russia written in the modern day can be considered complete without access to Russian archival material. One would not be wrong to wonder if and how these narratives may change in the context of present events.

In addition to being one of the first authors of the Russian borderlands to combine the state archives with the policy-focused approach and the lens of the top imperial authorities, Polvinen taps into several important historiographical discussions upon which numerous authors would seize in the decades after. Perhaps the most broadly conceptual of these debates is over the pandora's box that is Russification. The term is notoriously difficult to define and characterize within historiographic circles, though one might understand it (in highly general terms) as a process through which non-Russians become Russians via assimilation. The concept of Russification acts almost as a boogeyman to many scholars of the late Russian Empire because it was never defined or standardized by the imperial authorities and was often carried out on an *ad hoc* basis in different borderlands. Darius Staliūnas, for example, largely sidesteps the debate of Russification as a term in his 2007 book *Making Russians*, stating that "an analysis of Russian national discourse, especially the semantics of the terminology, is important, but the results of such analysis can give only very limited information about the aims of such policy."[5] Even more extremely, Stephen Velychenko avoids both the debate and the term itself entirely in his 1992 book *National History as a Cultural Process* despite tracing "Ukraine's past in survey histories of Poland, Russia, and Ukraine."[6] Indeed, scholarly dialogue about Russification has become so

[4] Tuomo Polvinen, *Imperial Borderland: Bobrikov and the Attempted Russification of Finland, 1898-1904* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), viii. Italics included in original.
[5] Darius Staliūnas, *Making Russians: Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 21.
[6] Stephen Velychenko, *National History as Cultural Process: A Survey of the Interpretations of Ukraine's Past in Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian Historical Writing from the Earliest Times to 1914* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1992), xiv.

focused and nuanced that it can fall out of the scope of studies that are not wholly dedicated to its discussion.

Often, then, substantive discourse on Russification can only be found within tertiary sources. Raymond Pearson, for example, was one of the first Western historians of the era to comment directly on the issue in his 1989 paper "Privileges, Rights, and Russification." Reflecting on the historiography prior to the late 1980s, Pearson alludes to the ongoing historiographical debate in which some historians used the terms "Russification" and "Russianization" interchangeably whereas others draw the distinction between "Russification" as a process requiring the erasure of ethnic identity through assimilation and "Russianization" as a process perpetuating the dominance of Russian language, culture, and institutions without the total erasure of local identity. Pearson concludes that "what has in the past generally been dubbed 'Russification' would be better named 'Russianization,' especially in the light of the strengthening view that the tsarist state possessed neither the totalitarian ambition nor the modern resources to undertake the ethnic assimilation of its minorities (other than perhaps the Ukrainians and Belorussians)."[7] Indeed, modern historiographical interpretations of imperial policy towards national minorities in the Russian empire's disparate borderlands can largely be broken down along the lines of efforts to Russify populations (assimilation or forced integration) and efforts to Russianize populations (acculturation or unforced integration).

Edward Thaden also wrote extensively about conceptions of Russification in the historiography. In his 1990 essay his essay "Russification in Tsarist Russia," for example, he finds that the term was first developed in the 1860s by German and Polish intellectuals, "who attributed to the Russian government the goal of forcibly making Russians out of non-Russians."[8] Thaden understood this as a definition selectively used by those opposed to tsarist rule. He, therefore, saw the need to differentiate between three types of Russification in the historiography: unplanned (suggesting the voluntary acceptance of Russian identity by imperial subjects), administrative (suggesting Russification of language, laws, and institutions), and cultural (which sought to supplant borderland culture with Russian language and culture).[9] Thaden, however, does not differentiate between Russification and Russianization on the basis of assimilation or non-assimilation as Pearson does. In Pearson's logic, administrative and cultural Russification on their own would imply Russianization since they do not by themselves result in the erasure of the non-Russian identity. This conceptual misalignment and the resulting historiographic tensions have powered historical conversations about Russification and Russianization into the present day.

The conversation around the contours of Russification also led to the debate surrounding how imperial authorities applied policies across the borderlands, a debate which Polvinen's work provided commentary on in the Finnish context. This debate was

[7] Raymond Pearson, "Privileges, Rights, and Russification," in *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia*, ed. Olga Crisp and Linda Edmondson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 89-90.
[8] Edward Thaden, "Russification in Tsarist Russia," in *Interpreting History: Collective Essays on Russia's Relations with Europe*, ed. Marianna Forster Thaden and Edward Thaden (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 211.
[9] Ibid, 211, 213.

sparked largely by an oversight on the part of previous generations of historians, who, according to Pearson,

> focused myopically upon a few highly visible minority nationalities who seized and then monopolized international attention, and made sweeping generalizations from this limited sample… To attempt to generalize about the one hundred or more national minorities within the empire on the basis of just three patently unrepresentative nationalities must be indefensible for any professional historian.[10]

While Pearson referenced Finns as one of the overly studied minorities, he is specifically talking about the historiographic family that focuses on Finnish responses to Russification rather than policies from the imperial perspective. From this imperial perspective, in which Polvinen is a pioneer in the Finnish historiography, it is notable that leading up to Bobrikov's appointment as Governor-General, "the special status of the Grand Duchy of Finland had gradually become firmly established… Even during the reign of Alexander III."[11] They were allowed "their own police force, their own currency, their own postage stamps, their own railway system and, most obvious to Russians, the Finns spoke their own local languages of Finnish and Swedish."[12] Certainly, the tsarist government had been attentive to the challenges of national minorities in the borderlands for decades before Polvinen's period of study and had, at times, acted to crush those movements. Imperial bureaucrats were evidently not as lenient with Ukrainian nationalists in the empire's southwest borderlands, Polish nationalists in the west, relatively neglected Central Asian and Siberian subjects, or Jews confined to the Pale of Settlement, each having their own unique experiences with imperial policy. In this light, Polvinen's findings contribute to the thesis that imperial authorities applied policies toward nationalities in an imbalanced manner across the borderlands. From a historiographical perspective, if imperial authorities unequally applied policies across borderlands, then through which methodologies could these inequalities be analyzed? Could the distinctions between Russification and Russianization be further refined?

Indeed, Polvinen himself weighed in by understanding Russian policy in Finland as initially focused on integrating Finns into Russian culture and society before fully assimilating them. He points out that "In 1881… Finland's newly appointed Governor-General, the former Chief of the Russian General Staff Count Fedor Logginovich Heiden, outlined far reaching integration measures in a memorandum to the Tsar… integration policy was to be implemented step by step" but "in 1891… in a memorandum concerning the 'Finnish provinces' he now refused altogether to recognise Finland's status as an autonomous state."[13] Here, Polvinen suggests that Russification and Russianization policies were not mutually exclusive and inflexible but could complement one another depending on the situation in a given borderland.

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[10] Ibid, 87.
[11] Polvinen, *Imperial Borderland,* 21-22.
[12] Peter Waldron, "Imperial Borderland: Bobrikov and the Attempted Russification of Finland [Review]," *Europe-Asia Studies* 48, no. 7 (1996), 1244.
[13] Polvinen, *Imperial Borderland,* 22.

Yuri Slezkine was another early contributor to these debates. Though only dedicating a few chapters to the imperial period after 1864, Slezkine's geographically and temporally expansive study of Russia's northern borderlands in his 1994 monograph *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* supports Polvinen's implications and makes its own novel contributions. Most interestingly, Slezkine highlights the "conflicting rationalist and romantic impulses" of imperial administrators in applying Russifying and Russianizing policies (though Slezkine equates the two in his book through the exclusive use of the term Russification).[14] These conflicting impulses are evident in imperial administrators adopting the term *inorodtsy* (aliens) during the nineteenth century. The term was used for subjects who "were different from others in ways that were legally recognized but had no legal justification. By the early nineteenth century 'foreigners' (*inozemtsy*—people from a different land) had become 'aliens' (*inorodtsy*— people of a different birth)."[15] This change in terminology implies that imperial authorities considered *inorodtsy,* such as the peoples of the North, the Central Asian steppe, and the Russian far east, among other groups, to be geographically part of the Russian Empire, but not necessarily so in the social, cultural, economic, or political sense. Slezkine, therefore, demonstrates that the language and attitudes of imperial bureaucrats toward borderlanders can be used to reveal the former's policy priorities at different times and in different places.

The combined reemergence of Russian archival sources in the 1980s and 1990s and renewed scholarly interest in how imperial Russian authorities managed their heterogeneous empire fundamentally reshaped the historiography of the Russian Empire. Historians began to take a closer look at assumptions that had governed their work for decades, finding that many needed to be reconsidered. In particular, the idea that Russification was a coherent, desired, and consistently applied policy to turn the empire's non-Russian subjects into Russians warranted further investigation. Was it true that Russian authorities did not necessarily want an all-Russian Empire? Did imperial authorities seek less intrusive means to hold the empire together in the form of Russianization? If Russianization was its own process separate from Russification, then how was it different in practice? These questions were central in the minds of Russian borderland scholars at the turn of the twenty-first century.

**Twenty-First Century Development**

In the 2000s, the ideas that emerged around Russification and Russianization in the 1980s and 1990s were further developed and taken in interesting new directions. Seizing on the work done in the two decades prior, particularly that of Pearson and Thaden, Benjamin Nathans developed the differentiation between Russification and Russianization based on assimilation vs. non-assimilation more sharply in his 2002 book *Beyond the Pale,* stating,

[14] Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 389.
[15] Ibid, 53.

> Assimilation should be understood as a process culminating in the disappearance of a given group as a recognizably distinct element within a larger society. By contrast, acculturation signifies a form of adaptation to the surrounding society that alters rather than erases the criteria of difference, especially in the realm of culture and identity. Integration is the counterpart of acculturation (though the two do not necessarily go hand in hand) in the social realm—whether institutional (e.g., schooling), geographic (patterns of residential settlement), or economic (occupational profile).[16]

In Nathans' view, as in Pearson's, the criterion for assimilation is the erasure of a unique socio-cultural identity. Acculturation is defined by an adaption or alteration to a unique cultural identity rather than erasure, and integration is cast as the social "counterpart of acculturation" because it is also defined by adaption rather than erasure, but to a social identity rather than a cultural one. It is also noteworthy that, though supporting Pearson's assertion that Russification and Russianization were different processes based on assimilation, Nathans also adopted Thaden's three-type framework wherein non-dominant group cultures and/or institutions could be made more Russian/Russianized, or these non-dominant groups could be fully assimilated and Russified. Thus, by using Thaden's framework to support Pearson's assertions, Nathans took a significant step toward resolving the core historiographic tension established by Pearson and Thaden.

Darius Staliūnas added further nuance to Nathans' thoughts five years later in his book *Making Russians.* The author suggests that,

> We would even broaden the concept of integration and also regard the measures by which the imperial authorities sought to turn people of other nationalities into loyal subjects as integration. Thus, *Making Russians* does not necessarily mean Russian policy sought to assimilate people of other nationalities. Acculturation or integration also shows the authorities' aim to turn people of other nationalities into Russians in the political, rather than the ethno-cultural sense. Acculturation or integration policy could also use methods of "divide and rule." The aim of such policy was to support those non-dominant national groups, which, in the opinion of imperial officials, were loyal to the empire and would thereby serve as a counterweight to a disloyal nation, which was the authorities' main opponent in a given region.[17]

Staliūnas posits multiple new ideas here. First, he believes that if one focuses on policies of integration and acculturation, they demonstrate that the imperial Russian

[16] Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 11.
[17] Staliūnas, *Making Russians*, 2. Italics included in original.

bureaucracy was not solely focused on assimilating nationalities into the empire and was not necessarily focused exclusively on ethnonational identities. Second, he posits that attempts to acculturate and integrate borderland populations made use of strategies distinct from strategies of assimilation. In cases where imperial authorities attempted to acculturate and/or integrate, one may find strategies that can be described as "divide and rule," an approach that he defines as supporting non-dominant groups loyal to the empire in opposition to national groups that were not.[18]

Jeff Sahadeo's 2007 monograph *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865-1923* represents another work that asked these novel questions and implemented these new methodologies as well as one that strongly supports Staliūnas' assertions. Sahadeo places his focus on the tsarist administration in imperial Tashkent, a leading city in the empire's Central Asian borderlands, asking whether imperial policy toward Central Asian minorities could be classified as Russification or Russianization and what means were used for these ends. Indeed, Sahadeo's choice of geographical and cultural focus brings much to the discussion. Imperial administrators tended to view their Central Asian colonies as "oriental," a term that Edward Said has noted "connotes the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century European colonialism."[19] Much like the subjects in Slezkine's study, the conception of Russia's Central Asian borderlands as uncivilized, oriental, and non-national by imperial administrators is likely a major reason for the region's underrepresentation within the historiography of nationalism in the borderlands.

Sahadeo's monograph plugged this gap. He found that "Tsarist administrators needed the cooperation of important sections of the Central Asian population to rule the region in a cost-efficient manner. Native notables in Tashkent pledged outward allegiance to the tsar in exchange for assurances of political and cultural autonomy."[20] Despite being unaware of Staliūnas' discussions and findings since the two authors published in the same year, Sahadeo's work provided strong evidence for the idea that "divide and rule" was utilized as a strategy by imperial administrators in the borderlands. This suggests that imperial policy was focused on acculturation and/or integration and, therefore, represents Russianization rather than Russification. These conclusions further prove that Russification and Russianization were distinct processes and should not be conflated in the broader historiographical conversations.

Six years after Staliūnas and Sahadeo took this step, Faith Hillis applied many of their ideas for the first time to the context of imperial Russian Ukraine in her 2013 work *Children of Rus'*. Hillis too finds that imperial administrators clearly applied "divide and rule" strategies to this borderland by allying with apparently loyal "Little Russian"

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[18] Staliūnas has since further discussed and clarified the nuances of defining this approach and its applications in the northwest and western borderlands of the late empire. See Darius Staliūnas, "Affirmative Action in the Western Borderlands of the Late Russian Empire?," *Slavic Review* 77, no. 4 (2018): 978–97.

[19] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, First Vintage books edition. (New York: First Vintage Books, 1979). Unfortunately, this online edition of the book does not include page numbers.

[20] Jeff Sahadeo, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865-1923* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 230.

intellectuals, whom she defines as "activists who saw local traditions as compatible with imperial rule" against seemingly disloyal Ukrainians, whom she defines as "activists who questioned the unity of the East Slavs and the authority of the imperial state."[21] Hillis' work also adds to a recent and relevant historiographic subtheme that focuses on the role of modernization and urbanization in perpetuating Russification and Russianization.[22] The development of Right-Bank Ukraine's (the portion of the country West of the Dnipro River) infrastructure and urban spaces during the nineteenth century and the increase in the urban population that occurred as a result meant, in part, that intellectual circles flourished. It was within these circles that imperial authorities found the Little Russian intellectuals with whom they sought to develop an Orthodox East Slavic identity that could unify the empire, and also within these circles that they found Ukrainian intellectuals who needed to be undermined.

However, citing *Making Russians* and other texts in an oblique reference to the Russification vs. Russianization debate, Hillis semantically adopts "a set of policies that some referred to as 'Russification'"[23] for the policies in Right-Bank Ukraine rather than Russianization. Given the conceptual development of Russification and Russianization prior to her work, a more meaningful engagement with and application of the terminology may have enhanced scholarly understanding of the "Little Russians" that Hillis studies. While Russification was an affectual force in contemporary Right-Bank Ukraine, it was primarily within policies directed toward Ukrainian activists. Russianization, on the other hand, seems to be the more appropriate way to categorize policies directed toward the Little Russians. The author herself states, "By the early twentieth century, official tolerance for nationalist agitation on the right bank permitted activists to create a socially variegated and mass-oriented Russian nationalist movement, which soon became the preeminent political force in the region."[24] Therefore, while this work supports the distinction between Russification and Russianization conceptually, it also shows that this distinction is not yet fully deployed linguistically within recent historiography.

Malte Rolf's *Imperial Russian Rule in the Kingdom of Poland,* first released in German in 2014 and subsequently translated into English in 2021, applied the term "Russification" more thoughtfully. His work offers a refreshing perspective on a borderland that is well represented in the historiography, from which imperial administrators' first real experience with an agitated national group came in 1831 and again in 1863-1864. In characterizing the Kingdom of Poland as "a test ground where the imperial government devised and developed ways to secure power and to force integration," Rolf adopts the conceptual language of Russification to support this characterization.[25] His extensive citation of both Thaden and Staliūnas further alludes to the fact that a secondary objective of Rolf's work

[21] Faith Hillis, *Children of Rus': Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation* (Cornell University Press, 2013)*.,* xiii.
[22] Staliūnas, Sahadeo, and Rolf also fit into this trend.
[23] Hillis, *Children of Rus'*, 4.
[24] Ibid, 2.
[25] Malte Rolf, *Imperial Russian Rule in the Kingdom of Poland, 1864-1915* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021), 5.

was to develop the contours of Russification as a concept, thereby making the book one of the field's most up-to-date works.

The implications of this decades-long discourse now appear to be spreading into neighboring historiographical fields. In his book *Beyond the Amur*, published as part of the University of British Columbia Press' Contemporary Chinese Studies series, Victor Zatsepine's primary goal is "to describe and analyze the emergence of the Amur frontier society and how the region was claimed and divided by two states [Imperial Russia and Qing China] despite difficult natural conditions."[26] In approaching the claims of imperial Russian bureaucrats over a borderland from an adjacent historiographical perspective, Zatsepine highlights the core of the field's recent debates and broadly summarizes their findings without needing to engage with them directly. The author accomplishes this by concluding that "Russia engaged in a variety of initiatives to expand its influence in the region," that "one persistent feature of this frontier was inconsistent and insufficient support from central governments," and that "this frontier region came to symbolize the ambiguity of imperial attitudes, which ranged from high expectations to neglect."[27] Zatsepine identifies both a primary motivator for these historiographical conversations (the ambiguity of imperial attitudes) and the consensus that has resulted (a variety of attitudes and policies that represented high expectations for a region and its peoples and/or relative neglect). Indirectly, and from a historiographic outsider's perspective, the author supports the notions that imperial authorities applied policies inconsistently across time and space, that they depended highly on the perceptions and attitudes of contemporary actors, and that they employed particular strategies depending on these attitudes and goals of said actors.

By interrogating and refining the initial historiographic thoughts from the 1980s and 1990s, the authors of the twenty-first century have made great progress in defining what Russification and Russianization mean, how they are different, and how their different policies were applied in the empire. The recent scholarship highlighted here strongly supports the idea that imperial administrators adopted different policies depending on the contexts of different borderlands at different times. Indeed, Russification and Russianization now seem to be generally accepted as different processes involving different policies with different goals. In cases of Russification, historians tend to agree that policies were oriented toward assimilation. In cases of Russianization, however, policies were oriented toward acculturation and/or integration through strategies like "divide and rule." Simultaneously, however, authors like Hillis illustrate the fact that the distinction between "Russification" and "Russianization" is either not fully accepted or fully deployed as of the 2010s. While the overall development of this historiography has done much to clarify the differences between the two, a definitive comparative analysis of these processes throughout the empire remains extremely challenging given the necessity of understanding the diverse cultures and languages of the empire's many non-dominant groups and how imperial authorities treated each one. Nonetheless, historians must continue to understand

[26] Victor Zatsepine, *Beyond the Amur: Frontier Encounters Between China and Russia, 1850-1930* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017), 16.
[27] Ibid, 6, 160, 162-163.

Russification and Russianization more deeply, given that both are being implemented in the Russian Empire's borderlands today. This reality raises important questions. Must historians again innovate to generate new insights? If so, how? What new analytical tools are available, and how can they help us make further progress? In fact, one does not have to look far to find promising possibilities.

**Historiographic Frontiers**

I advocate for two potential new frameworks that could be of use in analyzing Russification and Russianization. Both lenses proposed here have precedent within the current historiography, though to different degrees. The first potential new lens for understanding Russification and Russianization within imperial policies is through the concept of *inorodtsy.* As highlighted by Slezkine in *Arctic* Mirrors, the term technically refers to a legal category used administratively throughout the empire (generally translated into English as "aliens"). However, John Slocum points out that it "was used, often in a pejorative sense, to refer to all of the empire's non-Russian inhabitants," and that historians have "remarked on the shift in usage whereby, in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, the formal sense of the term gradually gave way to the informal one."[28] Given the scholarly focus in the historiography on the relationships between imperial authorities and local peoples, it would reasonably follow that most works would at least include a mention and discussion of *inorodtsy* in the context of their respective borderlands. Curiously, however, there does not appear to be a deep focus on *inorodtsy* in the literature. While Staliūnas uses the term throughout his work and Slezkine and Hillis define its significance in theirs, it is absent from Polvinen's, Sahadeo's, Rolf's, and Zatsepine's monographs. How might this be explained?

Staliūnas positions this inconsistency as "the problem of what kind of general term could be used to describe the 'objects' of nationality policy."[29] He correctly identifies *inorodtsy* as the term used for "aliens" or "when national groups were differentiated from Russians," but states that separate analytical categories are required to analyze the relationship between "Russians" and "*inorodtsy."*[30] Why can the concept of *inorodtsy* not be used as a category of analysis in and of itself? Indeed, Slocum's essay suggests that it can and perhaps should be. He highlights the fact that "The changing usages of the term *inorodtsy* are bound up with changing conceptions of 'Russianness' and the Russian nation, and evolution in the concepts of nationality and nationhood… the evidence presented here relates to broader questions concerning changing conceptions of identity, difference, and "otherness" in Russian history."[31] It seems, then, that the development and usage of the term *inorodtsy* in the empire over time can be used as an analytical framework through which to interrogate identity in the empire as well as strategies of control, but this has not happened for one reason or another as far as I am aware.

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[28] John Slocum, "Who, and When, Were the Inorodtsy? The Evolution of the Category of 'Aliens' in Imperial Russia," *The Russian Review (Stanford)* 57, no. 2 (1998), 173.
[29] Staliūnas, *Making Russians,* 22.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Slocum, "Who, and When, Were the Inorodtsy?" 175.

Another potential new lens within the historiography of the Russian Empire's borderlands is "national indifference." None of the monographs analyzed in this essay use this analytical lens, and the only mention of it is found in Hillis' introduction.[32] National indifference was most cohesively hypothesized as an analytical category in a 2010 work published in the *Slavic Review* by Tara Zahra.[33] It should also be emphasized that by 2010, multiple works analyzing national indifference as an influential force in constructing national identities in various European regions had already been released, including one by Zahra herself.[34]

Zahra's essay, however, made two novel and critical points relevant to the historiography of nationalism and imperial Russia. First, "while national indifference has long been an obsession of nationalist activists in east central Europe, it has only recently become a subject of historical research."[35] Indeed, while the concept of national indifference is as old as the concept of nationalism, it has received scant scholarly attention within the historiography. Second, "Making indifference visible… enables historians to better understand the limits of nationalization and thereby challenges the nationalist narratives, categories, and frameworks that have traditionally dominated the historiography of eastern Europe."[36] Understanding national constructions in the empire and how imperial administrators responded to them enables historians to interrogate distinctions between "Russification" and "Russianization." At the same time, understanding national constructions also necessarily means understanding their limits, and so works that fail to do so might be considered incomplete analyses.

While the lack of analysis of national indifference and its nonuse as an analytical lens is understandable in Polvinen's, Staliūnas', and Sahadeo's monographs given when Zahra's article was released and in Zatsepine's given that nationalism is not a central focus, the oversight of both Hillis and Rolf to incorporate this novel framework into their studies appears to be a missed opportunity.[37] To her credit, Hillis does explicitly point out that, "Scholars of national awakenings have generally taken for granted the transformative power of nationalism—a tendency recently challenged by historians who argue that the traditional focus on nation-building has obscured the fact that popular indifference and even hostility toward national ideas persisted well into the modern period."[38] However, she continues on by stating, "Rather than focusing on expressions of consciousness or

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[32] Hillis, *Children of Rus',* 11.
[33] See Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic review* 69, no. 1 (2010), 93–119.
[34] See James Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008). Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). Pieter Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).
[35] Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities," 93.
[36] Ibid, 94.
[37] Sahadeo's work, in particular, would benefit from the utilization of National Indifference as an analytical lens because attempts to nationalize the peoples of the Central Asian steppe were so weak, as the author points out.
[38] Hillis, *Children of Rus'*, 11.

indifference, this book analyzes how nationalist agendas evolved through time and across space, often in convoluted and nonlinear ways."[39] While Hillis does not reject the concept of national indifference as an analytical framework, her choice not to incorporate it seems to in some capacity limit the overall historiographical impact of the book. Understanding indifference and hostility toward national ideas in the Right-Bank is an important component in understanding the development of national movements, imperial responses to those movements, and categorizations of those responses because indifferent or hostile people represented a problem for spreading nationalist agendas. Given the failure of tsarist officials to implement Official Nationality[40] in Right-Bank Ukraine and throughout the rest of the empire, its absence seems a disappointing choice when considering Zahra's point about interrogating the limits of nationalization. The disappointment of this choice is further felt through Hillis' nonuse of the term "Russianization," an important aspect in the evolution of nationalist agendas in the southwestern borderlands.

In Rolf's case, this omission seems particularly egregious given that James Bjork's monograph on national indifference in the Polish-German borderlands was released more than a decade prior.[41] Both Hillis and Rolf could have placed their work into a novel and rapidly evolving historiographic framework, thereby giving it greater meaning and relevance without detracting from their overall points and goals. For Hillis, this is perhaps not as pressing today, considering the tragic relevance of her work to contemporary events in Ukraine. A focus on national indifference in Rolf's monograph, however, would have added strong evidence to a work premised on the belief that "giving a dense description of the particular weave of interaction found [in the monograph's region and period] is the best way to demonstrate the complexities, inconsistencies, and formative dimensions of the imperial context."[42] Certainly, the inclusion of national indifference as a category of analysis should feature more heavily in the historiography of nationalism in the Russian Empire's borderlands going forward. I would argue that this need is even more pressing in the historiography of the Russian Empire's borderlands given the *ad hoc* nature of the empire's construction, its geographical vastness, and the heterogeneous composition of its population.[43]

Considering the relevance of these two lenses to current historiographical debates, one would hope to see more extensive use of them by scholars in the near future. Studying

[39] Ibid.
[40] Official Nationality was an ideology developed by Tsar Nicholas I and Count Sergei Uvarov for the cohesion of the Russian Empire. It espoused three interdependent concepts: religious orthodoxy, political autocracy, and imperial nationality. For a translation of Uvarov's original phrasing, see *A Parting of Ways: Government and the Educated Public in Russia, 1801-1855*, trans. Nicholas Riasanovsky (Oxford: Carendon Press, 1976), 108. In terms of secondary discussions on Official Nationality, extensive scholarship exists. For an up-to-date example, see Valerie A. Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny, "Imperial Russia in the Moment of the Nation, 1801-1855" (New York, NY: [Oxford University Press], 2017).
[41] Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole.*
[42] Rolf, *Imperial Russian Rule in the Kingdom of Poland,* 5.
[43] Brian Boeck's case study of the Don Cossack Host in the Russian Empire touches on all these points. See Brian Boeck, *Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Additionally, for a more direct focus on *ad hoc* imperial policies through different periods of Russian history, see Kees Boterbloem, *Russia as Empire: Past and Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2020).

the use of the term *inorodtsy* over time in different borderlands would allow historians to understand how imperial administrators and Russians in general "othered" non-dominant national minorities. This understanding, in turn, would enable more in-depth analysis of whether tsarist officials used strategies of "Russification" or "Russianization" to control these groups, potentially adding to the further understanding of "Russification" and "Russianization" within the historiography. National indifference also offers a promising new analytical framework. Through an understanding of the limits of national constructions, the lens would enable scholars to better investigate the processes and results of these constructions. This, in turn, would facilitate a greater understanding of imperial responses to those constructions, thereby further clarifying the line between "Russification" and "Russianization."

**Conclusion**

The reemergence of Russian archival documents after the Brezhnev era was revolutionary for non-Russian scholars of the Russian Empire. Westerners studying the region's history through the lens of the Cold War generally tended not to differentiate between Tsarist and Soviet imperialism, thereby creating historiographical blind spots. Although access remained somewhat limited to Western academics until the fall of the Soviet Union, historians from countries that fostered warmer political relationships with the Soviet Union made extensive use of state archives, reshaping the subsequent historiography in their wake. Polvinen's 1984 publication is a prime example of this phenomenon. Part of a new wave of archivally-informed scholarship, Polvinen's work was at the forefront of Finnish historiography on the period of imperial rule and the vanguard of Western historiography on the Russian Empire. Part of this is attributable to his commentary on the concept of Russification.

Russification has long been an opaque concept to historians. The shifting intentions and inconsistent applications of Russifying policy by imperial authorities mean that a clear definition or universal criteria for identifying the process remains elusive. Since the opening of the Russian archives, however, the concept has come to be more generally understood as a process that results in the assimilation of a non-dominant group through the erasure of its unique ethnic identity. Pearson was among the first to suggest that processes of Russification should be viewed as distinct from processes of Russianization on the basis that Russification necessitates the erasure of local identity, whereas Russianization does not. Though Thaden did not necessarily adopt Pearson's ideas initially, he did provide a three-type framework for assessing imperial policy in the form of unplanned, administrative, and cultural Russification. Nathans resolved some of this tension by combining Pearson's ideas and Thaden's framework to posit that assimilation generally acts as a means toward the ends of Russification whereas acculturation and integration generally act as the means toward Russianization. Furthering the idea that Russification and Russianization were separate policies, Staliūnas found that processes of acculturation and integration deployed their own unique strategies, such as "divide and rule." Importantly, Slezkine provided a framework of analysis for understanding why imperial authorities applied certain policies at different times and in different places through the language and attitudes of the imperial administrators applying them.

These findings imply that policies were applied piecemeal and unequally in different borderlands, often on a haphazard basis. This oversight on the part of previous generations of scholars of the Russian Empire is generally attributed to a combination of the inaccessibility of the archives as well as the fact that their focus was on a very limited sample of highly prominent national minorities in the borderland. From this limited sample, scholars attempted to justify overgeneralized conclusions. Staliūnas and Sahadeo's monographs represent a historiographical school that is changing these conceptions. They both contribute evidence to new hypotheses suggesting Russification and Russianization were separate processes based on unequal policy applications in the borderlands which are evidenced by the presence of "divide and rule" strategies.

Still, not all authors of recent works have been completely in tune with these new hypotheses. While Hillis' work does support the hypothesis of unequal policy applications in the borderland and the idea of "divide and rule," her choice not to differentiate between Russification and Russianization in her work despite her awareness of Staliūnas' framework somewhat softens its impact, though the work remains valuable to other historiographic conversations. It seems, perhaps, that more time is needed for the concepts to fully penetrate the language of scholars when discussing nationality policies in the imperial borderlands. Malte Rolf, on the other hand, demonstrates that the nuance of this historiographical debate is being picked up in some areas of recent scholarship. Citing many relevant works and adopting the appropriate language, Rolf's represents the most up-to-date scholarship on the Russian Empire's imperial borderlands. Demonstrating the overall importance of these historiographic conversations and trends to adjacent historiographic fields, Victor Zatsepine indirectly incorporates and supports many of the aforementioned findings into his own study from an outsider historiographic perspective.

As is always the case with historiographic developments, new questions are arising, and new analytical tools are being utilized to generate new narratives. One potentially promising route to further understanding Russification and Russianization is to analyze it through conceptions around *inorodtsy* populations over time. Slezkine's work has long implied the potential of this concept for understanding the opaque attitudes and policies of imperial administrators toward different borderlands. Nonetheless, this framework is contested within the historiography, and little appears to have been done in terms of exploring it since the publication of *Arctic Mirrors*. The framework of National Indifference, on the other hand, is much more developed in terms of theoretical background. Unfortunately, it has not been widely deployed for analyzing imperial nationality policies in the Russian Empire's borderlands despite allowing historians to interrogate where national constructions failed or were underdeveloped.[44] There is no time to waste asking and answering these important historical questions. Ongoing efforts to Russify and Russianize borderland populations today will not wait for historians to understand them, and the prospect of accessing Russian archives is the most uncertain it has been in nearly fifty years. Though it is certain that historians will continue finding new ways to understand the Russian Empire's imperial borderlands in the future, the time to start is now.

[44] It has, however, been relatively extensively deployed in the study of Soviet nationality policies.

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