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Eurasia on the Move

The collapse of the Communist bloc thirty years ago has coincided with and greatly contributed to the remarkable explosion of global migration which we observe today, be it with an excited or a rather troubled eye. The Berlin Wall was only one of many barriers that came tumbling down at the end of the twentieth century, bringing about an unprecedented expansion and intensification of human mobility, transforming the world as we know it, together with our own self-understanding as its inhabitants. Post-Communist Eurasia has become a crucible of new political and economic relations, in which fresh and often ambiguous social and cultural identities are being erected on, in some respects remarkably durable, but in others extremely precarious, historical foundations.

Although Eurasia is now fully integrated into the overarching trends of global capitalism and follows closely the latter's structuring of international power relations and migratory flows, there is little straightforwardly predictable about the future development of this increasingly multi-polar geopolitical area. Russia/USSR's former imperial borderlands — in Europe, Central Asia and the Far East — are emerging as particularly vibrant foci of multi-directional mobility, economic growth and social development, in their own right. Radically new, twenty-

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first-century, forms of both migration and diasporisation are effectively ‘deterritorialising’ Eurasia, both at the local level and in the global context. This, of course, does not imply some sort of dilution of Eurasian identities within the global melting pot; quite the contrary, a re-crystallisation of identities has intensified and diversified in post-Communist Eurasia to an unprecedented level; and even when appearing like potential forms of ‘resistance’ to the forces of global capitalism, the ‘politics of identity’ (national, ethnic, religious, social, or other) are quite clearly one of its most vital supports.

It is within this broader framework of ‘Eurasia on the move’ that the following contributions to this issue of *Antropologicheskii forum* should be read. These articles are selected from nearly thirty papers delivered at the conference entitled ‘National Identity in Eurasia II: Migrancy & Diaspora’, which took place at Wolfson College, University of Oxford, on 10-12 July 2009. The conference emerged as part of the project ‘National Identity in Russia from 1961: Traditions and Deterritorialisation’ <<http://www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk/russian/nationalism/>>, directed by Professor Catriona Kelly (New College, Oxford) and funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council.

The aim of this conference was to explore different aspects of migration and diaspora in the countries that once formed part of the Soviet Union, as well as those states and cultures that border the former superstate. The emphasis was on current, post-Soviet, trends, but these were consistently viewed from a historical perspective, with a particular awareness of the legacies of the Soviet past.¹

The conference approached both ‘migration’ and ‘diaspora’ in the broadest possible way. The looser concept ‘migrancy’ was preferred in the conference title in order to incorporate the full variety of mutually overlapping forms of human mobility, which can no longer be distinguished neatly or unambiguously (for instance, the conference included relevant discussions of tourist travel). Migration itself was analysed from a macro- as well as micro-perspective. The conference looked at contemporary migration policies and the practicalities of its implementation; it deconstructed representations of migrants; it examined issues of social status and networking in the migrant context, together with problems of gender and labour, education and social integration. Similarly, the term ‘diaspora’ was treated as entirely open and in need of de-reification. It was understood less as a bi-product of migrancy per se and more as part of the broader politics of national and ethnic mobilisation and identity-making in contemporary Eurasia and beyond.

¹ For the full conference report see: <<http://www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk/russian/nationalism/newsletter.htm>> (*Newsletter 4*).

The conference gathered together sociologists, anthropologists, historians, geographers and political scientists from the UK, France, Germany, Russia, Kazakhstan, Australia, Canada and the US. It presented a wide-ranging, cross-disciplinary forum for informed discussion of issues of enormous topical significance. The meeting was sponsored by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the Centre for East European Language Based Area Studies (CEELBAS), as well as by Oxford's Wolfson College, the Centre on Migration Policy and Society (COMPAS) and the European Humanities Research Centre (EHRC).

The conference opened with a keynote lecture by Anne de Tinguy, Professor at INALCO and Sciences Po in Paris and an international authority on migration processes after the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹ This lecture is reproduced here in full. It surveys the transformations of the migration field in the former Soviet space since the Second World War, emphasising the way in which these developments reflected broader social and political changes in this geopolitical area since the collapse of the Berlin Wall. It also expertly places the presentations at the conference in context.

The introductory part of the conference focused on issues of migration in the Soviet era. Among the topics tackled here was the Soviet political screening and stigmatisation of post-World War Two returnees, the experiences of non-Russians migrating from the Soviet peripheries to Moscow and Leningrad in the 1960s–70s, and the identity-formation of young migrant workers on the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) railroad project in the 1970s–80s. In what follows, we are publishing a paper that discusses further important aspects of migrancy in the mid-twentieth century Soviet Union. Siobhan Peeling's contribution discusses the resettlement of Leningrad in the aftermath of the Second World War. She shows how post-war migrants to the city were treated ambiguously by the indigenous Leningrad population and the city authorities — both as a valuable source of labour for urban reconstruction and repopulation, and as a deviant category, a threat to public order, sanitary condition and the city's cultural traditions.

The rest of our conference was devoted to problems of migration and diaspora in the post-Soviet era. Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the former Soviet space has emerged as a field of proliferating 'diasporas', requiring new strategies of politico-historical and socio-anthropological analysis. At the conference we examined the recent, highly politicised, constructions of a 'Russian Diaspora' in both the 'near' and the 'far abroad' as well as the politics of identity and

¹ See esp. Anne de Tinguy, *La Grande Migration: La Russie et les Russes depuis l'ouverture du Rideau de fer* (Paris: Plon, 2004) (available in Russian as *Velikaya Migratsiya*. M., 2011).

culture of multiple (new and old) ‘diasporic’ groups mushrooming in the Caucasus, Central Asia, Siberia and the Russian Far East. Crucial here has been the analysis of the specific means of diaspora-construction in the post-Soviet context.

Since the year 2000, economic migration has developed, in one way or another, into arguably *the* hottest political topic in practically all post-Soviet societies and this issue was naturally addressed at length and from many different perspectives at our conference. Particularly important was the discussion of the expanding labour migration networks between Russia and Central Asia. These were examined *both* in terms of the macro-patterns of expanding cross-border mobility and changing government strategies of bureaucratic regulation, *and* in terms of the micro-dynamics of migration decision-making and the ground-level realities of migrant (non)integration in the ‘host’ societies. Prominent in the exploration of these phenomena was the persistent ambiguity that one finds in the rhetoric surrounding the issue of ‘migration’ in the post-Soviet space. This ambiguity seems to be based on the contradiction between, on the one hand, the portrayal of migration as a positive economic and demographic necessity, and on the other, its consistent conceptualisation as a social ill and bureaucratic problem. These ambiguities emerge especially clearly in the paper by Amandine Regamey, Lecturer in Political Science at the Sorbonne, University of Paris I, which we are including in the present issue. In her contribution, Regamey deconstructs the complicity between the Russian government’s immigration policies and the various representations of labour migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia, both by the Russian mass media and by the country’s mainstream political figures. Her analysis dwells, among other things, on constructions of labour migrants as a potential ‘source of disease’ and it exposes the Russian elites’ role in legitimising the migrants’ continued stigmatisation through official discourse as well as bureaucratic and health-protection measures.

The final part of our conference looked at contemporary migration from the post-Soviet space to the West. This included the analysis of such phenomena as the growing waves of highly qualified Russian migrants who are successfully creating trans-national social and business networks between Russia and various Western metropolises, or, for instance, the ongoing formation of a state-backed network of Russian diasporic organisations designed to involve contemporary Russians abroad in the Russian Federation’s international relations, including its cultural diplomacy programmes. Crucial also are the masses of lower-skilled migrants from various parts of the former Soviet Union who still seem to be trickling into the West at a steady

rate, often only as transit migrants or temporary workers with semi-legal status.¹

The papers that follow thus offer a representative sample of discussions on migration and diaspora held in Oxford in July of last year. They were selected primarily for their interest to the readership of *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*. Other papers presented at the conference are in the process of being published elsewhere.² We hope that this collection will serve as a limited but valuable contribution to current and future debates on issues of such vital significance to so many people in contemporary Russia and elsewhere.

¹ This group was explored in particular in a paper by Nick Harney, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Western Australia, whose current ethnographic research deals primarily with East-European migrant communities in Naples. See Nicholas Harney, 'Transnationalism and entrepreneurial migrancy in Naples, Italy' // *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2007, 33(2): 219–232. Nicholas Harney, 'Precarious migrant knowledge workers: new entrepreneurial identities in Naples, Italy' // *International Journal of Manpower*, 27 (6): 572–587, etc.

² For example, the papers by Nicholas Harney and by Anne Gorsuch (on tourism in the Soviet Union) appeared in Russian translation in *Antropologicheskii forum* 13, and this material will appear in English when monographs by these scholars are published.