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INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF RUSSIA AGAINST THE WAR: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE STAGES OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AS A RESOURCE OF ACTIVISM

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This paper explores the role of ethnic identity among the Indigenous Peoples of Russia as a resource for anti-war resistance. It focuses on the qualitative processes of ethnic self-identification and self-determination at the individual level, addressing a gap in the social and political analysis of activists' behaviour in Russia. By employing the framework of identity as a narrative, it analyses interviews with ethnic decolonial anti-war activists who possess Indigenous heritage and represent various ethnic groups across Russia. The research highlights the developmental stages of ethnic identity that activists have experienced, particularly emphasising the stages that serve as resources for activism. Moreover, it emphasises the fact that for individuals who have established contact with their ethnic identity, activism emerges as an inherent and dynamic response to historical oppression. Additionally, the paper distinguishes the role of ethnic identity among Indigenous peoples from their racial identity, by providing a nuanced understanding of the specific challenges and dynamics faced by Indigenous peoples in their activism.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous Peoples of Russia, ethnic identity, activism, identity, narrative analysis

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity, as part of social identity (Tajfel 1981), is revealed in periods of crisis and instability, which empowers it with potential for resistance. Since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion on Ukraine in 2022, the number of anti-war movements based on belonging to ethnic minority groups has increased rapidly. Over twelve months, the activists' anti-war movement has grown from zero to dozens. Educational initiatives using decolonial narratives have emerged from different

regions of Russia. New projects devoted to ethnic minority groups are constantly being created in independent Russian-language media. Indigenous Peoples of Russia who identify themselves as ethnic minorities have started sharing their stories on social media about facing discrimination from the Russian ethnic majority. Hashtags indexing keywords about racism and xenophobia in Russia toward ethnic minority groups display over a thousand of comments and messages from people who identify as Indigenous Peoples of Russia[1] (Zibrova 2023, 54–60). Emerging activist movements can be categorised into anti-war advocacy groups, educational initiatives, anti-racism discourse and political alliances. The question is this: how do the processes of ethnic self-identification and ethnic self-determination at the individual level influence the decision to become an activist?

Activism is political engagement linked with awareness of and involvement in current sociopolitical events (Fish et al. 2021). The aim of the engagement is to seek to change formal political processes and policies through grassroots organising (Dennis 2016, 29–51). Nevertheless, resistance to political conflicts, where a state justifies military actions against another state, can be recognised as more than seeking justice within the state, making the activism of Indigenous Peoples of Russia against the war a unique case of appealing to ethnic identity as a resource for resistance. War is one of the most impactful events in the sociopolitical and economic landscape that affects everyone. It is a crisis that changes lives and brings instability. In social and political activism, war is an unavoidable issue. It can serve as a powerful catalyst for developing activism skills and reinforcing values, particularly when activists question and challenge the objectives and justifications of the war.

The interest of active representatives of Indigenous Peoples in their ethnic identity unites them and transforms this identity into political and social power, rendering them visible to the ethnic majority group. According to Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples by the International Labour Organisation (1989) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (adopted by the General Assembly on 13 September 2007), the right to self-identification is recognised as a fundamental right of Indigenous Peoples. However, despite international legislation, the laws of the Russian Federation limit the definition of indigeneity as "Numerically Small Indigenous Peoples of North Siberia, and the Far East" (KMNS; *Korenniye malochislenniye narody Severa, Siberia i Da l' nega Vostoka*),

1 The terms "Indigenous" and "Indigenous Peoples" are capitalised to recognise and respect the distinct cultural, social and political identities of these groups, following the APA guidelines for racial and ethnic terms, which promote the use of bias-free language and the acknowledgment of diverse identities and experiences. See "Spelling and Capitalisation of Racial and Ethnic Terms" (APA Style) and "Summary Guidelines for Race and Ethnicity" (American Psychological Association), for example: "Indigenous People of Canada" https://www.apa.org/about/policy/summary-guidelines-race-ethnicity (accessed 30.05.2024).

defined by including ethnic groups with less than 50,000 people who live in the areas of traditional settlements of their ancestors and maintain a traditional way of living. As a result of this contradiction with international legislation, the concept of indigeneity is a contested issue in Russia (Ksenofontov and Petrov 2024).

The Russian territory consists of over 80 provinces, with an approximate demographic composition of 80% ethnic Russians and 20% non-dominant ethnic groups. Ethnicity in Russia is often linked to a territory: 21 provinces are "ethnic republics", whose specific status designates them as "ethnic homelands", a result of ethnic federalism. Additionally, the criteria for being recognised as Indigenous within Russia place the largest groups of ethnic minorities, who live in "titular nations" inside the ethnic republics, in a position of having unequal rights compared to the KMNS. Despite the fact that the term "titular nations" is neither officially recognised nor legally codified in the laws of the Russian Federation, it usually refers to a large ethnic group that gives its name to an ethnic republic. This feature of Russian ethnic diversity overlaps with economic and spatial inequality, while the latter often has specific cultural traits due to the history of settlement (Yusupova 2024). The issue of ethnic equality is shaped historically and has a huge impact on how the Indigenous Peoples have reacted to the war.

However, the individual psychological processes of developing ethnic identity among Indigenous Peoples have not been socially and politically analysed as part of activists' behaviour in Russia. This paper seeks to address this gap by focusing on the qualitative processes of ethnic self-identification and self-determination at the individual level to explore the role of ethnic identity among Indigenous Peoples in Russia as a resource for anti-war resistance. This research is based on interviews with ethnic anti-war activists who possess Indigenous heritage and represent various ethnic groups across Russia. These case studies are examined using the framework of identity as a narrative.

The first part of the paper is dedicated to reviewing and synthesising the existing literature on ethnic identities and activism, including anti-war movements, through the lenses of decolonising approaches to ethnic, racial and Indigenous studies. Second, I explain the background of the study and describe the research process, demonstrating how decolonial approaches expand the understanding of the processes of ethnic self-identification and self-determination. Third, I present the narratives themselves. Finally, I analyse these narratives and show the developmental stages of ethnic identity that activists have experienced, particularly highlighting the stages that serve as resources for activism.

ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ACTIVISM

The role of ethnic identity among ethnic minorities and Indigenous Peoples in activism has been studied from different perspectives: racial positioning and political

engagement, collective well-being and resistance, allyship and collective identity. Studies show that ethnic identity has a strong connection with ally behaviour and predicts involvement in political action (Fish et al. 2021). Activists belonging to communities of colour have different ways of engaging in activism based on reflections of their experiences of oppression and personal experiences of discrimination, whereas White activists critically investigate their own power and privileges. Moreover, the first steps in activism, where ethnic identity plays a crucial role, such as in anti-racial organising, are critical for the development of social justice identity among ethnic minorities (Kornbluh et al. 2020, 151–163). Ethnic identity is also examined in the context of non-violent resistance. This perspective shows a link between belonging to an ethnic minority and negative stereotypes that associate many minority groups with violence and hostility, leading to support for more punitive policies that are far more likely to target minorities. Emphasising awareness of such perceptions is suggested as a new focus of activist work (Manekin and Mitts 2022, 161–180). Ethnic-racial identity can be a source of strength and resilience when experiencing injustice. Additionally, it may serve as a springboard for recognising and disrupting marginalisation. Developing ethnic-racial identity impacts other social identities that shape relationships with different communities (Rivas-Drake et al. 2022, 317–326).

Nonetheless, belonging to an ethnic minority is not enough for political and social engagement (Lin 2020). Studying ethnic identity from the perspective of group consciousness in activism shows that personal experiences need to be transformed into political motivation. Depoliticised ethnic minorities, however, tend to deny racism and explain their experiences of discrimination as functions of individual bigotry rather than systemic racism or inequality. Reflection on experiences of ethnic identity challenges dominant racial tropes and bridges gaps between racial positioning, experiences, identities and ideologies. These processes are crucial for activists (Lin 2020).

It is important to distinguish the role of the ethnic identity of Indigenous Peoples from racial identity. Although Indigenous Peoples experience similar challenges of discrimination, language loss and marginalisation as other ethnic minorities, their situation is distinct in terms of their rights and identities. Unlike other ethnic minorities who focus on individual rights, Indigenous Peoples emphasise the importance of collective rights. Despite being recognised as ethnic minorities, Indigenous people often find themselves excluded from Indigenous status, which leads to not being accepted as disadvantaged groups (Sarivaara et al. 2013, 369–378). Moreover, a recent comparative analysis of convergences and divergences in the contemporary activist imperatives and aspirations of groups such as Black People and Indigenous Peoples shows that, for instance, the #BlackLivesMatter movement has the potential for anti-racism activism, but it does not address the anti-colonial imperatives

of Indigenous Peoples in activism (Townsend-Cross and Gatwiri 2024, 1–22). Exclusion from Indigenous status, as a result of a history of colonisation and a settler-colonial strategy that manifests itself in assimilating large groups of Indigenous Peoples into mainstream society, can be recognised as one of the specific features that have shaped the activism of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia.

Nevertheless, race and ethnicity are rarely articulated in the activism of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia within the state. Land rights are expressed in terms of territory and economic inequality, which are highlighted in local ecological protests driven by various factors other than ethnicity. These protests also occur infrequently and involve all inhabitants of the areas where the protests takes place, regardless of their ethnicity. Rights related to language and culture are expressed in terms of social inequality, while race and ethnic discrimination are not recognised as structural and institutional problems. These features of the activism of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia are shaped by the securitisation of race and ethnic issues due to the authoritarian context in the Russian Federation (Yusupova 2019, 1459–1478), whereas the absence of discussion in Russian academia about the activists' behaviour among the Indigenous Peoples of Russia is a consequence of the refusal to see race as an object for social and political analysis (Yusupova 2021, 224–233). All these might lead to different strategies of appealing to ethnic identity in activism, specifically in anti-war resistance within conflict states like Russia.

Overall, there is a contradiction in the methods applied to the study of ethnic identity in social and political activism. On the one hand, quantitative findings do not indicate ethnic self-identification and self-determination at the individual level. On the other hand, qualitative studies that do not analyse ethnic identity development fail to explain which stages of ethnic identity impact engagement in activism. Even though existing research emphasises the role of ethnic identity in activism for ethnic minorities, it is not clear how the experience of being Indigenous impacts political and social engagement, especially for the Indigenous Peoples of Russia. Notably, these activists began their work during the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which the Russian government labelled as "denazification", shaped under the ideological narrative of the "Russian World" (*Russkii mir*). This narrative appears in various state doctrines, including the Russian constitution, prioritizing ethnic Russians above others within the state.

METHOD: IDENTITY AS A NARRATIVE

Identity, one of the most complex concepts in social science, is studied through many theoretical approaches. This term is richly, and as Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 1–47) put it, "indeed for an analytical concept, hopelessly – ambiguous". The conceptual

and explanatory work depends on the context of its use and the theoretical tradition from which it derives (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 1–47).

My research question, "how the ethnic identity of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia is related to their anti-war activism", is situated within a theoretical framework that interprets identity as a basis for social or political action (Cohen 1985, 663–716) and as a collective phenomenon involving perceived significant sameness among group members (Connor 1994; Collins 2022). In studies of Indigenous identity, self-identification, as an expression of the right to self-determination, holds significant importance (Sarivaara et al. 2013, 369–378). This is due to the history of oppression of Indigenous Peoples and the erasure of identity through assimilation strategies. Therefore, it is important for us, in answering the research question, to show how Indigenous people themselves articulate their identity and their relationships with it at different stages of their lives. Here, I use the theory of the three-stage model of ethnic identity (Phinney 1989; 1990, as cited in Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014, 9–38). This theory assesses three components of ethnic identity: exploration, resolution and affirmation as well as their relationship to context and the role they play in ethnic identity development. However, unlike existing research that has examined quantitative processes of the relationship between sociopolitical activism and ethnic identity in large sample-sizes (Fish et al. 2021), I focus on qualitative processes of ethnic self-identification and self-determination at an individual level. To determine these processes, I apply the concept of identity as a narrative (Hammack 2008, 222–247), which focuses on the mechanism of constructing meaning and integrating personal experience and context. As personal narrations allow for the examination of the processes of social change, in this paper, I analyse stories of Indigenous activists to distinguish the ethnic components of their life strategies and the relationship between individual aspects and the processes of social change.

Background of the Study

Using decolonising research approaches, as advocated for by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (in Lee and Evans 2021), I proudly assert my dual identity as an Indigenous researcher and an individual who articulates her Indigenous experience in Russia with precision. I intentionally bridged the gap between myself as a researcher and the interviewees, sharing in their emotions as they recounted their experiences as Indigenous individuals. I shed tears alongside participants of my research as they shared their Indigenous experiences, and I took pride in their recognition of the value of their Indigenous identities, as well as my own. Introducing myself as Indigenous allows me to build trust with research participants. It was important for them to avoid expending unnecessary effort explaining the social, political and economic context

of being Indigenous in Russia and to focus on their personal experiences. Furthermore, one of the crucial aspects of my decolonising methodology as an Indigenous researcher was inviting participants to independently articulate the stages of their ethnic identity development. The application of universalisation, a Western-centric colonial approach that manifests itself by excluding or exotifying the experiences of "the Other" – those who do not belong to the West – is still utilised by researchers and significantly restricts our understanding of ethnic self-identification and ethnic self-determination processes (Lee and Evans 2021). Moreover, there remains a dearth of knowledge regarding when and how ethnic identity evolves into a resource for social and political activism.

Participants and Procedure

Some of the participants of the research had gone into exile, while others were residing in Russia at the time of the study. Considering the inherent risks associated with the involvement of ethnic anti-war activists in actions that make them more visible, I invited Anna Zueva, an independent journalist known as an ally to the Indigenous Peoples of Russia, to collaborate with me on this research project by conducting online interviews with participants together with me. Each interview lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. Zueva's role was to serve as a secure intermediary between myself, the main contributor to the research, and some of the participants. She compiled a list of potential participants who identify themselves both as Indigenous Peoples of Russia and also as activists and extended invitations for interviews through secure messaging platforms. This intermediate contact fostered a sense of safety among the participants, reassuring them that their contact information was not stored on my devices. Additionally, Anna was present during the interviews and contributed to the transcription of some stories. The transformation of these transcripts into narratives, the analysis of the data and the interpretation thereof, as well as the composition of this paper, were conducted by me, the author.

Nine activists agreed to participate in this study. Given that it focuses on the ethnic identity of Indigenous Peoples of Russia involved in sociopolitical and anti-war activism, it was crucial to invite participants who had experience living in Russia. The primary source of the data collected was from semi-structured online interviews. These interviews covered three main topics: (1) ethnic identity, which included questions about how participants identify themselves, when they started to recognise their ethnic identity, whether it was linked to specific events in their lives and how they would describe their relationship with their ethnic identity; (2) activism, which explored how and when their activism began and how they perceived the connection between their ethnic identity and their activism; and (3) the war, which investigated how the war has influenced their activism and ethnic identity.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed upon completion. The transcripts were organised chronologically to distinguish the evolving processes of ethnic self-identification and self-determination. To do so, I used the multimethod restorying framework (Nasheeda et al. 2019), which facilitates the transformation of transcripts into meaningful narratives. This framework consists of narrative inquiry, restorying and integration, all of which are conducted collaboratively with participants. The objective was to explore how various stages of life impact engagement in activism. To differentiate between these stages and to pinpoint which stage illuminates specific events and experiences, all the narratives were segmented according to the following timeline: "childhood and family", "youth and young adulthood" and "activism and the war". Some of the participants added the segment "now" if they assumed that their ethnic identity at the current life stage was different from the "war" segment. The segment "war" was divided into "activism" and "the war" for participants with activist backgrounds preceding the war (herein, and in subsequent sections of the text, "the war" is used as a shorthand for "the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine").

According to the multimethod restorying framework, "co-creating" and "meaning" phases are crucial for rendering stories fully complete. This approach allows for the filtering of any private information and for participants to claim ownership of their stories. The narratives were read and re-read by both the author and the participants to ensure that the sequence of events accurately reflected the participants' voices. Furthermore, this step contributes to a decolonial approach by involving Indigenous voices in representing their experiences and producing new knowledge, rather than appropriating their stories as mere scientific materials. During the "co-creating" and "meaning" phases, narratives were organised in chronological order and segmented into life stages. Each stage was named to mirror a particular phase of ethnic identity development based on the content of that stage. Every segment was titled to express the corresponding stage of their ethnic identity. These narratives were then forwarded to participants for adjustments.

In the "Results and Findings" section below, excerpts from the narratives developed using the multimethod restoring framework are presented. The stories have been shortened due to space limitations. For ethical and confidentiality purposes, names have been concealed and only ethnic identifications are mentioned.

This study has several limitations that warrant consideration for future research. Notably, an intersectional approach was not employed, and participants were not categorised by gender. It would be valuable for future studies to incorporate an intersectional lens to examine the interconnections between gender, sex, ethnicity and socio-political activism among the Indigenous Peoples of Russia within the Russian context.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Childhood and Family

The first segments of the stories are dedicated to the childhoods of the participants. The family was their first environment, where they experienced the initial stages of socialisation and encounters with the larger world, such as experiences in kindergarten, at school and interactions with peers. These early experiences set the stage for the development of their ethnic identity and their interactions with broader society.

The titles given to these story segments by the participants effectively capture their experiences and feelings as regards their early years. The segments are named as follows: "Denial and Embarrassment"; "Independence, Pride and Hatred"; "Awkwardness"; "Shame. Russian, but not Russian. Sakha, but not Sakha"; "My Ethnic Identity was Whole, but Not Valued"; "Being Buryat Means Being an Outcast"; "Realisation of the World's Scale and Interest"; "From a Natural Stage to the Breakdown of One's Ethnic Identity"; "The Natural Process of Absorbing Culture". Each title summarises the complex interplay between personal and cultural identity as experienced by the participants.

Although the first (social) identity crisis generally occurs in adolescence (Buckingham 2008), one's ethnic identity, as one type of social identity, develops in childhood. This period is characterised by greater sensitivity than in adolescence, as it is when a child discovers the significance of his or her appearance to others – skin colour, eye shape and so on – that a sense of inadequacy may arise, influencing the formation of personality (Erikson 1994).

> "Denial and Embarrassment"
> I lived in the capital (Cheboksary), where almost no one speaks Chuvash. No one spoke Chuvash at school. In my family, only my grandfather and grandmother speak it. They deliberately did not teach their children [my parents] Chuvash because they did not think it was necessary. They believed that it was, on the contrary, only a hindrance, hindering career advancement. (S, Chuvash)

> "Independence, Pride and Hatred"
> My family is purely Tatar. My mother is a teacher of Tatar language and literature. My parents themselves were sometimes embarrassed to speak Tatar [in public places]… The world was divided, so to speak, only into black and white: there were no stories about how good we Tatars are. Our history was studied superficially. (N, Tatar)

> "Awkwardness"
> Everyone in the family spoke Tatar, but I was not specifically taught the language. They always spoke Russian with me. The feeling of awkwardness is the main thing I remember from my childhood, and also perplexity. In the family, the Russian language

was dominant. But when I went to traditional Tatar family feasts the Tatar language was dominant, and everyone addressed me in Tatar. I understood, but couldn't reply. This feeling of awkwardness, that you are a bit of an incomplete Tatar, still haunts me. (L, Bashkirt's Tatar)

"Shame. Russian, but not Russian. Sakha, but not Sakha"
As a child, I didn't think much about [my] ethnic identity. The only thing was that I felt uncomfortable because I didn't speak the Yakut [Sakha] language… Later, when I was studying on an exchange in Singapore and China, I was constantly asked why I was from Russia but didn't look Russian. I had to constantly explain that there are many different peoples in Russia and people look different. I even shamed people for not knowing about the peoples of Russia. At the same time, I think I have a trauma (of identity) because the Sakha themselves didn't really accept me as a representative of their people. Relatives also joked about me, saying that I speak English well, but I had better learn my native language. I was ashamed, and this did not increase my desire to learn the language. (Y, Sakha)

"My Ethnic Identity was Whole, but Not Valued"
A good command of the Russian language gave me privileges, made me feel superior, as if I was developing some kind of snobbery… It seemed to me that my Tuvan identity was not particularly important and could not be useful in any practical sense. At that time, I did not understand the value of all this history [about being Tuvan]. (D, Tuvan)

"Being Buryat Means Being an Outcast"
This identity comes not only from me but also from society, how it identifies me. I found out that I am Buryat when I was seven years old. I started walking to school on my own. And boys on the street began to insult me and throw stones at me, shouting various offensive words… I understood that the world sees me differently than other people. I grew up in Irkutsk, a city with a colonial history. It is precisely with the atmosphere of the city that I associate the fact that for most of my life, I have perceived my identity as a burden. (U, Buryat)

The family plays a significant role in the formation of a person's ethnic identity. Provided that information about the traditions and culture of the ethnic group is passed on, even when confronted with the racist practices of the environment, children discover resilience and the ability to feel pride in their ethnic identity. Resilience can be demonstrated through these feelings of pride and can already occur in childhood but only when there is some degree of immersion in the culture, traditions and language of one's people.

"Realisation of the World's Scale and Interest"
I spoke Buryat and had some knowledge of the Tatar language. For the first time (at 9–10 years of age), I realised my ethnic affiliation when I moved with my family to

> Ulan-Ude. In the class, there were Russians, Buryats, Armenians, Jews. It was the first time I found myself in a diverse environment... Once, the guys forgot me at the market. They told the chess club leader about it. The teacher ran to the market and when she arrived, she saw me on a cushion surrounded by Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, drinking tea. I was content and happy. (P, Buryat)

> "From a Natural Stage to the Breakdown of One's Ethnic Identity"
> Everyone in my family spoke the Yakut [Sakha] language, and I did not notice my ethnic identity, despite understanding that I am Sakha and my relatives are also Sakha. (R, Sakha)

> "Natural Process of Absorbing Culture"
> I went to a national Buryat school with an in-depth study of the Buryat language. I absorbed all of this: games, holidays, important dates, rituals. Language is, of course, also an integral part of my identity… It's such a natural process when you grow up in an environment and absorb all this – thanks to school, as well. I grew up in a very Buryat sphere, so I didn't have problems with [ethnic] identity. (V, Buryat)

In the segment "childhood and family", important factors influencing the development of a person's ethnic identity include whether participants speak or do not speak their language, closeness or distance to the traditions of the ethnic group (holidays, religious and secular) and experience of discrimination based on ethnicity. In conditions of isolation and protection from the (ethnic) majority, when the ethnic majority suppresses the language, distorts historical facts or shows them only from their own perspective, ethnocentrism is formed as a defence mechanism. This puts an individual in a state of constant tension, struggling for the right to express his or her ethnic identity.

However, regardless of these elements, it cannot be asserted that their presence or absence is required for involvement in activism later in adulthood.

Youth and Adulthood

In Russia, the transition from youth to adulthood often involves leaving the family home and moving to bigger cities. This could be a district capital, the capital of an ethnic republic or Moscow or Saint Petersburg, the biggest cities in Russia. This change can deepen the development of a person's ethnic identity and push it to a new level. Several participants in this study considered how this time in their lives might have led to activism.

The story segments are named as follows: "Pride and Confidence"; "Acceptance"; "Nostalgia: Buryatia is Where I Am"; "Embarrassment and Otherness"; "Activism: Sharp Injustice and Civic Identity"; "Rejection: I Became Very Russian"; "Assimilation

Instead of Integration and Nostalgia as a Turning Point" and "Living in Constant Fear". Changing the environment contributes to the development of a person's ethnic identity in two ways. First, entering a more diverse environment where diversity is valued and encouraged causes individuals to manifest their ethnic identity. This fosters a close connection between one's ethnic identity and one's personality.

> "Pride and Confidence"
> In school, I went on an exchange programme to the USA, and there I talked a lot about my culture, about the Tatars and about the Bashkirts. There, my Tatar identity fully unfolded. A feeling of pride emerged. It was an amazing feeling. In Russia, I had never experienced anything like that… I realised that you can build much stronger connections with someone by bypassing this "Russian World", that you don't need it. Suddenly, nothing became important, but my ethnic identity became important. (L, Bashkirt's Tatar)

> "Acceptance"
> Being abroad, I was constantly explaining my origins to people abroad, [this] made me always talk about my people, and about the peoples of Russia in general. Despite some snobbery towards those who know little about this, I was forced to seek information myself, and this helped me start accepting myself, my ethnic identity. I began to think more about my uniqueness more often. (Y, Sakha)

Encouragement by the family to connect with one's ethnic identity in childhood endows resilience and the desire to preserve culture even when in an ethnic minority.

> "Nostalgia: Buryatia is Where I Am"
> When I moved to Saint Petersburg, I started missing Buryatia and organised a Buryat community with various events: a ball, screenings of Buryat films for fellow countrymen, cooking national dishes. I have always been proud that we are Buryats. I wanted all our people to be proud as well: I want us to know that we have talented people. For me, this is also a natural process of cohesion: far from home, you miss your homeland, and this can be compensated for by events, concerts, meetings with fellow countrymen. When I moved to another country, I also started organising meetings with fellow countrymen here. I never felt like a stranger anywhere, and at all the community gatherings, I felt safe. (V, Buryat)

Second, an environment that encourages uniformity, where it is important to resemble (primarily in appearance) the ethnic majority, questions the possibility of belonging to that majority. This does not suppress ethnic identity; on the contrary, it fosters

contact with it, constant awareness of its presence and the threat it carries as well as the search for ways to conceal it.

"Embarrassment and Otherness"
When I lived in Moscow, I realised that for the people who live there… I am not one of them… They do not perceive me as one of their own. Yes, we are friends, but I do not look like them [physically], and then for the first time, I realised that this [ethnic difference] exists… I thought, since we are similar, you are free to choose your own identity, but in Moscow, it turned out that this is not the case, that I really do not look the same… I started getting involved in activism and began communicating with different national patriots, activists. Their stories showed me that people can somehow stand out [using their ethnic affiliation]. At the same time, it was as if I was embarrassed by my nationality, embarrassed to push forward my ethnicity everywhere, including in activism. (S, Chuvash)

"Activism: Sharp Injustice and Civic Identity"
Most of the current Buryat activists appeared in 2012–2013. Then attempts by the Russian nationalist community in Buryatia began to cancel the mandatory study of the Buryat language, which contradicts the constitution… Later, I was shocked by the murder of one of the prominent Buryat public figures, journalist Yevgeny Khamaganov. I was very angry. During this period, I devoted a lot of time to educational and enlightening activities [Buryat language and culture]. Later, I helped during the livestock epidemic [in 2021]. When Buryat farmers were left alone with their problem, the government did not help. Such betrayal greatly disappointed me. Many lost their livelihoods and went to serve in the army to earn money and to survive. (P, Buryat)

"Rejection: I Became Very Russian"
Then came the stage of rejection. I finished school and entered university in the Faculty of Philology, majoring in the teaching of Russian language and literature. I still can't understand why I needed this… At that time, I became very Russian, so to speak. I speak and write in Russian better than many Russians, but still, sometimes I hear something like "go back to your Yakutia"… Sometimes people said to me, "Why don't you speak Sakha?" and I answered: "It doesn't matter what language you speak." I was ashamed to be Sakha. Yes, it was a feeling of shame, definitely. It was important for me to be like everyone else, not to stand out. Even, probably, going to study to be a Russian language teacher was a way for me to prove to myself that I am Russian. (R, Sakha)

"Assimilation Instead of Integration and Nostalgia as a Turning Point"
Then I moved to Moscow. In the faculty where I studied [at the university], out of more than a hundred students, I was the only Asian. Moscow has a strong influence on how you start to perceive and feel about yourself. There was a lot of microaggression, racist

> remarks and chauvinism towards me… I started to pay more attention to discriminatory things not only towards me but also towards others, as if this value was being encroached upon at the most basic level. Any question about my origin caused tension and a readiness to defend. (D, Tuvan)

> "Living in Constant Fear"
> Moving to Moscow was the next stage in the development of my ethnic identity. After that comfortable experience in the USA, I came to Moscow and plunged into a racial and ethnic hell. I was constantly stopped by the police…While I was studying, I observed racial segregation in student dormitories. We, the non-Russians, were housed with non-Russians from the same regions. Often these were dormitories with the worst conditions. To fit into the situation, I paid great attention to mastering the Russian language. Flawless command of Russian relieved some of the pressure and was my protective strategy… Now I have been diagnosed with depression, but I believe the first episode occurred after a year of living in Moscow. (U, Buryat)

Cases show that contact with one's ethnic identity, which reveals the potential for activism, occurs at the moment experience, often traumatic, is obtained. Traumatic experiences give rise to a sense of otherness. Encountering the ethnic majority, without feeling a sense of belonging and, in some cases, experiencing hostility from the majority, creates a feeling of being an outsider. This is an entirely appropriate response to violence, expressed as a desire to change the current order, reflecting the fundamental intention of activism.

Activism and War

The political engagement of activists of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia is reinforced by the experience of being the Other and the outsider, a theme that is reflected in the story segments titles as follows: "The Necessity of Speaking About (One's) Ethnic Identity"; "Death of Civic Identity and Hatred"; "Outrage and Solidarity"; "Unity"; "Anger, Struggle and Solidarity"; "Belonging"; "First Attempts to Manifest One's Ethnic Identity"; "Activism: Sharp Injustice and Civic Identity"; "From Hurt to Pride"; "Anger, Resentment and Necessity"; "Awakening and Value: Everything Fell into Place"; "Protest and Outrage: Not Standing Aside"; "Resistance: The Desire to Awaken My People from Deception" and "Loss, Burning and Anger".

> "The Necessity of Speaking About (One's) Ethnic Identity"
> When the war began, it seemed to me that it was necessary to speak now, as it has become super important, because the authorities are appealing to the fact that Russian culture is being suppressed in Donbas, in Ukraine, and I live in a republic where

the Chuvash Republic exists only on paper… It seemed to me that now, in culture, this [emphasis on ethnic identity] is a necessity because it shows global injustice. I think many people assess this situation similarly. They see that their relatives are being taken to fight through mobilisation for some values that have nothing to do with these people. Speaking about Chuvash culture and the Chuvash nation during the war seemed to me simply necessary. (S, Chuvash)

"Death of Civic Identity and Hatred"
There was a general mood in society from conversations: everyone was outraged that Tuva, Buryatia, and Dagestan natives as well as those from southern regions of the Russian Federation – Kalmyks and Kazakhs – were dying for the ideas of the "Russian World". Then many realised that if you were born non-Russian in Russia, then, indeed, let's just say, you were simply unlucky. Your life is worth significantly less than the life of a Russian. Your rights will be regularly discriminated against, and the majority of the country's population is fine with that. When I realised that (military) mobilisation was inevitable, I began to prepare, to research how I could help my fellow countrymen. I barely remember the period from September to the end of November. (P, Buryat)

"Outrage and Solidarity"
When the war started, I was just in shock and felt very ashamed. I probably cried for a month. And then I decided that I needed to do something. The example of other ethnic anti-war activists [the Free Buryatia Foundation] inspired me greatly. After some time, a friend from Australia wrote to me, saying, let's record a statement, like the Buryats do. Of course, I agreed. From that moment [the beginning of the war in 2022], I only read the news in Yakut, I listen a lot, I mentally live there, in Yakutia [the Sakha Republic]… They send everyone who is unprotected, including the Sakha, the Yukagirs and the Evenks, and there are even fewer of those. But this is not our war. We need to educate people, enlighten them, tell the history of the republic, the history of the peoples. (R, Sakha)

"Unity"
People started leaving Russia in huge numbers. After the start of mobilisation, I was not at home for a month: we were busy accommodating people. Chuvash, Mari, Bashkirs, Altai, Caucasians – we helped everyone. We never refused anyone help. At one point, I had 15 people sleeping on the floor at my home. The war, I think, played a unifying role. That is, among the Tatars, the national spirit began to awaken: we do not want to be victims of this war. (N, Tatar)

"Anger, Struggle and Solidarity"
I was angry that all of us, the Indigenous people, are hostages. That's why I understand Ukrainians so well: we have similar language traumas, experiences of our cultures being destroyed by Russia… Now I am engaged in educational activism, trying to talk more with Tatars, not for them, but with them. This is important. One of my anti-war

speeches became very famous, and it brought me both a lot of negative feedback, due to my pronunciation [from Tatars, unfortunately], and a lot of support… I see my mission in continuing to tell through… and through my research, through social networks about the Indigenous Peoples of Russia. (L, Bashkirt's Tatar)

"Belonging"
When the war started, I had a lot of anger and rage. The fact that I joined the team of Sakha activists greatly influenced the development of my ethnic identity. I realised that it was among them that I felt at home: we had similar childhoods; we are all from Yakutsk. I was very pleased that they included me in the team [of activists] and said that it didn't matter to them whether I spoke our language or not. Although I had some resistance because I doubted whether I was worthy to represent the Indigenous Peoples of Russia. (Y, Sakha)

"Awakening and Value: Everything Fell into Place"
With the beginning of this full-scale invasion, I realised how important it is to preserve this [Tuvan] identity when it can actually disappear so easily. There might be no Tuvan identity at all. I understood how fragile this thing is, how valuable it is, how unique it is… I am studying the history of Tuva and have started learning the Tuvan language again. It seems to me that I have realised the huge amount of pain I have lived with all my life. Activism, perhaps, has always been my attempt to protect myself. (D, Tuvan)

"Resistance: The Desire to Awaken My People from Deception"
Before the war, I didn't delve deeply into our history. I only knew it superficially, just the basics. And now, I am going through the next stage… I want to tell the Buryats that we were lied to. It's unfair! Because of this, I feel anger, but also strength, inspiration and hope. They nourish me now. I want to awaken the lost [ethnic] identity in other Indigenous Peoples [of Russia]. If you start studying your history, past, culture and language, you truly awaken and can shine a light for others. This is what we do with decolonial activists – we awaken other peoples, our fellow countrymen, from several centuries of slumber. (V, Buryat)

"Loss, Burning, and Anger"
My father died in the summer of 2021 from COVID because he did not receive proper medical care solely because of his race… Oxygen masks in Russia are made for European faces, and they do not fit Asians… The loss of my father radicalised me. I realised that the country does not need non-Russian peoples, especially Asian ones. We are openly neglected. Six months later, the war began. I perceive it as a colonial war… My heart breaks at the sight of photographs of young men who died in the war, my Buryats, fellow countrymen. I understand that this is related to discriminatory practices. The spark that ignited with my father's death was turned into a flame by the war. And now I am in a state of burning. I am burning, and I am angry. (U, Buryat)

Feelings of anger, rage, pain, shock and fear of being vanquished as an entire ethnic group, along with a strong intention to resist the war discourse, a willingness to unite and readiness for solidarity among the Indigenous Peoples of Russia, push ethnic identity to the next level of development. Ethnic identity shifts from a position of being concealed as a threat or a position for manifesting pride to becoming a source of anti-war resistance. Furthermore, speaking from the position of being Indigenous acquires a power that was previously unfamiliar to activists. The power of being in contact with one's ethnic identity provides confidence fundamental to the intention to protect rights and impact the existing social order, even if contact with one's ethnic identity was established later.

The war has made the Indigenous Peoples of Russia visible to the global world due to the constant efforts of activists since the war began, revealing discriminatory colonial practices towards Indigenous people and ethnic minorities. However, visibility still troubles activists and raises issues of safety navigating through the new context of being immigrants or political refugees and also contending with predominantly ethnically White Russian liberals who might view Indigenous activists as a threat that could lead to separatism and the potential collapse of Russia as a state. This context amplifies inner reflections on what it means to be Indigenous in a post-colonial world that still experiences the circumstances of the colonial era, such as wars and militarisation. The process of resilience, which has always existed among the Indigenous Peoples of Russia but was temporarily hidden during the Soviet period, then revitalised (Balzer 2022) at the beginning of modern Russia and then hidden again, is now developing into a new stage where ethnic identity is a crucial element.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study delves into ethnic identity as a resource for activism through narrative analysis. By adopting the concept of identity as a narrative (Hammack 2008, 222–247), it focuses on the mechanism of constructing meaning and integrating personal experience with context. Personal narratives enable the examination of the role of identity in the process of social change. The stories of Indigenous activists identify the ethnic components of their life strategies and explore the relationship between individual aspects and the process of social change.

Exploring further, the uniformity in the development of ethnic identity and its engagement is brought into question. Despite employing the three-stage model of ethnic identity (Phinney 1989; 1990, as cited in Umaña-Taylor et al. 2004, 9–38) within this study, personal narratives disclose that the stages specific to ethnic identity – exploration, resolution and affirmation – do not unfold in a linear or sequential manner. The stories of the research participants show that contact with their ethnic

identity was not constant: they might explore it in childhood due to traumatic experiences or family efforts to preserve tradition and culture, then re-explore it in adulthood due to obtaining knowledge of the hidden history of colonisation. Resolution and affirmation might occur several times due to oppressive circumstances where it is important to choose which identity to disclose so as to protect oneself. This realisation emphasises how ethnic identity, contextualised, manifests in varied forms, leading to the understanding that each individual's path is uniquely fashioned.

Adding to this complexity, the influence of Russian ethnocentrism on non-Russian populations reveals a tendency to perceive ethnic identity as primarily utilitarian. This perspective, emerging from a colonial Russian worldview that asserts an ethnic hierarchy, becomes internalised by ethnically non-Russian individuals, especially Indigenous people. Such internalisation fragments identity, necessitating an ongoing negotiation of self in pursuit of safety. Herein lies the paradox of ethnic identity: it is not merely a choice. What Hammack (2008, 222–247) calls "desire" can be applied as motivation in the context of activism, but it is also an acceptance of inherent identity, challenging individuals to embrace their ethnic identity amidst external pressures. Once this acceptance is made, motivation can be redirected inward to foster a connection with one's ethnic identity, thereby conserving resources rather than expending them. This principle is applicable not only to race and ethnicity but also to any identity that is not a result of personal choice, such as gender, age, physical and mental characteristics, origin and, in some cases, religious or migrant status.

The field data shows diversification in how the ethnic identity of being Indigenous is articulated in the participants' narratives, as expressed in their frustration. This complexity in "identity" is compounded by the persistent disagreement between essentialism and constructionism. This contradiction can be further understood through the lens of identity construction, which suggests that, while identity is shaped by meaningful social practice, motivation is not simply a matter of choice. This distinction helps bridge the essentialist-constructionist divide, highlighting the dynamic interplay between inherent traits and social influences.

Transitioning to the realm of activism, it is posited as a dynamic response to systemic historical oppression, highlighting the dichotomy of behaviours: nurturing ethnic identity towards activism versus suppressing it, leading to passivity or alignment with the majority. This dichotomy underlines that engagement with ethnic identity evolves into varying degrees of active expression. This process is inherent and evolving, akin to an awakening, and signifies a move from personal struggle to a collective endeavour for social change, marked by profound emotional and existential shifts. The phenomenon of racial and ethnic awakening, or increased awareness, is studied by researchers such as Neville and Cross (2017, 102–108).

Although empirical evidence from the narratives of the research participants reveals that the formation of ethnic identity is an individual process, it is deeply intertwined with collective experiences and historical contexts. The participants expressed that their personal experiences of discrimination and cultural revival are closely linked to collective movements for social change. This leads to an open discussion about whether those Indigenous persons who participated in the war did so as a result of postcolonial issues, which might be a topic for further investigation. Because the number of anti-war activists with Indigenous heritage is extremely small, making each case unique, it would not be correct to project their experience onto the entire population of the Indigenous Peoples of Russia. Furthermore, due to oppressive circumstances within Russia, openly articulating an anti-war position is not legal. Thus, this might lead to different strategies in developing ethnicity and activism. This variation could become a topic for future research, examining how non-liberal contexts shape activist approaches among Indigenous Peoples.

Ethnic identity is inherently linked to the past (Romanucci-Ross 1995), yet it concurrently exists in both the present and the past. Engagement with historical narratives enables an understanding of an ethnic group's history, characterised by significant loss and suffering. This engagement, however, is constructed in the present, allowing for a critical re-evaluation of the systems in which the individual is embedded and a re-assessment of the past from a contemporary perspective. Such a process can elicit a range of emotions, including resentment, disappointment, hatred, anger and shock, which can subsequently act as catalysts for proactive measures aimed at altering the current state of affairs. Through this mechanism, Indigenous individuals are drawn into the process of social change.

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