

# Perm Oblast: Autonomies to Choose From

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**A**lthough ethnic groups are always of interest to ethnologists, linguists, culturologists, and other experts in nonpolitical fields, they are usually noticed by political scientists only when they are involved in a conflict—an actual or potential one, or one imagined by the scholar. When the various peoples of the Soviet Union came to the forefront of the country's political life in late 1980s, many scholars both in the West and in the Soviet Union itself observed that, in the words of Neil Melvin,

[t]he onset of ethnic warfare in Yugoslavia and the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union found Western scholarship severely wanting in terms of its understanding of nationalism, especially ethno-nationalism, in the former communist states . . . after decades of neglect nationalism has again become a central component of the academic study of Central and Eastern Europe and articles and books about nationalism have become something of a growth industry.<sup>1</sup>

Such confessions were numerous through the 1990s; nevertheless, the same mistake was repeated more than once.

Pronounced ethnopolitical conflict may tell a lot about the past of the groups involved, as well as about the politics of the country. But such conflict is always an extreme case of social development and as such is not typical. Even in the stormy years of perestroika and its immediate aftermath, probably two or three dozen Soviet peoples were involved in open conflicts, while the rest of the approximately 130 ethnic groups officially listed in the 1989 census remained more or less silent, and thus mostly unnoticed by political scientists.

More than that, any interethnic conflict irreversibly changes the pre-existing situation. Studying ethnopolitics (and the “national question” in general) through the magnifying glass of conflict is like studying the radiance of a remote star whose light is bright and visible, though the star long ago ceased to exist. In the same way we derive information from studying ethnic conflicts—but only about the ethnic groups that entered the conflict; the groups emerging from it are different and demand new studies.

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Therefore I believe that it is more useful to study interethnic relations and ethnopolitics during periods of calm. As a case study of contemporary Russian non-crisis ethnopolitics one can examine the situation in Perm oblast. Far from being unique, the region provides an interesting test site for different approaches to regional and local ethnopolitics due to its population's ethnic composition, its history, and recent sociopolitical developments.

Occupying 160,600 square kilometers in the easternmost part of Europe, Perm oblast is situated at the junction of the Russian plain and the Ural mountains. The last Soviet census of 1989 gave its population as 3,091,500. The largest among the region's more than eighty ethnic groups were Russians (83.9 percent of the population), Tatars (4.9 percent), Komi-Permyaks (4.0 percent), Bashkirs (1.7 percent), Ukrainians (1.5 percent), and Udmurts (1.0 percent) (for more details see tables 1 and 2). The ethnic distribution of the population has remained generally unchanged till now.

**TABLE 1**  
**Main Ethnic Groups of Perm Oblast, 1939–89**

	1939	1959	1979	1989
Total population	2,087,518	2,992,876	3,008,211	3,091,481
Russians	1,768,386	2,420,230	2,508,323	2,592,246
Percent of total	85	81	83	83
Tatars	80,727	165,829	157,726	150,460
Percent of total	4	6	5	4.9
Komi-Permyaks	122,464	136,385	128,286	123,371
Percent of total	6	5	4	4
Bashkirs	28,952	39,577	48,752	52,326
Percent of total	1	1	2	1.7
Ukrainians	27,420	71,985	44,018	45,711
Percent of total	1	2	1	1.5
Udmurts	9,781	21,888	32,311	32,756
Percent of total	0.5	1	1	1
Chuvashs	8,821	15,293	11,661	10,765
Percent of total	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.3
Germans	n/a	n/a	17,823	15,326
Percent of total			0.6	0.5
Belarusians	n/a	32,800	19,834	18,842
Percent of total		1	0.7	0.6

Sources: *Vsesoyuznaya perepis naseleniya 1939 goda. Osnovnye itogi. Rossiya.* (St. Petersburg: Goskomstat, 1999), 45; *Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1959 goda. RSFSR* (Moscow: Goskomstat, 1963), 326; *Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1979 goda.—tom 1, kniga 1* (Moscow: Goskomstat, 1989), 305; *Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1989 goda.—tom 1, chast 1* (Minneapolis, 1992), 550–51.

**TABLE 2**  
**Percentage of Ethnic Group Members in Perm Oblast Using Russian**  
**as a Native or Second Language, 1959–89**

	1959		1979		1989	
	Native language	Second language <sup>a</sup>	Native language	Second language <sup>a</sup>	Native language	Second language <sup>a</sup>
Komi-Permyaks	11.1	n/a	18.1	67.2	24.1	65.6
Tatars	8.9	n/a	19.5	67.0	26.2	63.9
Ukrainians	41.5	n/a	52.3	44.8	53.2	39.7
Bashkirs	2.3	n/a	7.9	57.9	13.2	65.2
Udmurts	28.2	n/a	34.6	55.9	41.3	52.9
Belarusians	55.0	n/a	61.8	35.5	65.1	32.1
Germans	n/a	n/a	58.7	38.6	67.3	30.4
Chuvashs	32.1	n/a	43.9	52.0	49.8	47.1

Sources: *Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1959 goda. RSFSR* (Moscow: Goskomstat, 1963), 326; *Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1979 goda.—tom 7, kniga 1* (Moscow: Goskomstat, 1989), 305; *Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1989 goda.—tom 7, chast 1* (Minneapolis, 1992), 550–51.

<sup>a</sup>Second-language speakers speak the Russian language fluently as a second language.

It may be useful to note that in recent years the oblast proved politically and socially calm by Russian standards. That is not to say that the oblast is free from the problems raised by the Russia-wide crisis; as an example one can mention the forced liquidation of the Kizel coal mining area, which requires the re-education and job placement of thousands of workers. Still, neither the population at large nor the regional authorities tried to exploit these problems to obtain additional benefits, to launch open confrontation with the federal government, or to isolate the oblast from all-Russian economic and social systems. The only attempt of that kind took place in 1994, when the regional legislature decided to withdraw its signature from the Treaty of Social Accord—at that time the beloved child of President Yeltsin, who viewed it as the foundation for political stabilization in Russia. But the move had no consequences and was qualified both by federal authorities and by the majority of the oblast population as the personal venture of the then-chairman of the regional legislature.

Despite the multitude of its ethnic groups, the oblast has not seen any major interethnic conflicts, at least not during the last century. The roots of this peaceful coexistence may lie partly in the region's ethnopolitical history. Territory presently occupied by Perm oblast began gradually to come under Russia's rule during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. At that time, the local Finno-Ugrian population had only started the transition from tribal organization to state,<sup>2</sup> so the Russian state was the first and only one the people knew. Up to the end of the fifteenth century, Permian land remained a remote borderland of the Novgorod principality, poorly integrated with its main territory. At the same time, peasants from

other Russian territories began to settle there, laying the foundation for future economic and cultural activities and mutual influence among different peoples and tribes.

Modern Russia's scholars are unanimous in regarding this Russian penetration as predominantly peaceful. Of course, conflicts took place from time to time, caused by tax collection, the imposition of Christianity (after initial expeditions of Orthodox missionaries in 1462–63), and so on. The first prince of the Voguls—one of the native tribes—to adopt Christianity (and the new Christian name Mikhail) and voluntarily recognize Moscow's authority was killed by his own people, who remained pagans.<sup>3</sup> But as far as it is possible to judge from available evidence, those conflicts were socioeconomic, not interethnic in their origins, and they did not exceed the average level of conflict in ancient Russia. Even armed resistance to Christianization was less fierce than in many Slavic territories of the state (such as Novgorod). Later, beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century, the same "peasant colonization" helped Russians to establish interethnic relations with Tatars and Bashkirs, though those relations were aggravated by vivid memories of recent wars between the Russian state and the Golden Horde and Kazan Khanate. The Tatar population of the region was originally formed by refugees who escaped from Kazan after it was stormed and subdued by Ivan IV ("The Terrible") in the 1550s.

Permian lands were completely integrated into the Russian (Muscovite) state by the end of the fifteenth century. It is worth noting that at that time, Moscow's reign was imposed on many principalities with Russian or Slavic populations. That means that the multiethnic population of the Urals became part of an emerging state, not an already established one, and thus could not derive a sense of specific identity from its late-coming. Relations between Moscow and indigenous populations did not differ from those of Moscow and, say, Tver or Ryazan—traditional Slavic territories. The short existence of the Permian principality, whose rulers tried to maintain independence by establishing equal relations with Moscow, Kazan, and the Siberian Khanate in 1472–1505, left no considerable traces in the history of the Urals or of Russia as a whole.

During the years of this gradual integration of Permian lands into the Muscovite state, interethnic relations were so close, especially between Russians and Komi-Permyaks, that contemporary ethnologists even accept the fact of complete de-ethnicization of particular groups of both Russians and Komi-Permyaks, who lived completely surrounded by another people.

The revolutions of 1917 (the "February" and "October" ones—though the former took place in March and the latter in November) started a twenty-year period of administrative experiments on the Ural lands. The idea of creating a huge and semiautonomous Ural region—embracing territories or parts of territories of the former Perm, Ufa, Arkhangelsk, V'atka, Orenburg, and Tobolsk *gubernii*—was first put forward in 1918 by several politicians who supported the White movement in Siberia.<sup>4</sup> Civil war made the realization of the idea impossible at that moment, but the Soviet government pursued it after the war ended. In the course of the new administrative division of Soviet Russia, the Ural oblast was

established in 1923,<sup>5</sup> covering more than 1.7 million square kilometers, with a population of over 7 million, but without any signs of autonomous rights. Both White and Soviet reformers cited only economic effectiveness, not historical or ethnic grounds, as justification for such a huge unit.

Some rayony of the region were nevertheless established according to ethnic lines. In 1923–24 the administration discussed the proposal to unite the ethnic territories in a new autonomy. As a result the Komi-Permyak autonomous okrug was established in February 1925 as part of Ural oblast; it became the first small-scale (compared with the union republics and autonomous republics that emerged earlier) ethnic autonomy in the Soviet Union. Presently the okrug has a territory of 33,000 square kilometers.

According to the 1989 census the total population was about 160,000, with Komi-Permyaks composing about 61 percent; in the okrug and the rest of the Soviet Union there were 152,000 Komi-Permyaks in 1989. After the Ural oblast was divided into several smaller parts in 1938, due to the virtual impossibility of governing the huge land mass, the autonomous okrug became part of the newly emerged Perm oblast.

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Though several Komi-Permyak activists vigorously promoted the idea of autonomy, the establishment of the okrug was not to the slightest extent the result of any ethnic or ethnopolitical movement among their people. There are no records of any ethnic disturbances or even expressions of ethnic goals among Komi-Permyaks during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The tiny circle of indigenous intelligentsia was almost completely Russified. In 1925 only 23 percent of the okrug population was literate (in the USSR at that time the average was 36 percent), and schools offered only Russian-language education.<sup>6</sup>

Those who promoted the creation of the okrug and who then headed the newly emerged autonomy lacked not only any coherent program for Komi-Permyaks, but even an understanding of their economic and social circumstances. Archival papers give striking examples of this ignorance. Seven months after the okrug was established, at the Second Okrug Communist Party Conference, one of the local executives flatly stated, “Statistics given in my report are not quite correct and thus don’t reflect the real situation.”<sup>7</sup> Despite repeated appeals for “further studying the village” (as there were no other settlements in the okrug except villages, this could be translated as “studying the population”), notes from the same conference stated that “little attention has been put to it.”<sup>8</sup> Delegates of both the First and the Second Okrug Communist Party Conferences (both in 1925) had to admit that the “overwhelming majority of the [Communist Party] members are at

the same level of political development as the surrounding peasants are, and some are even behind the peasants”; “*Moujiks* will surpass us [the Communist activists]; they are more advanced politically than rural Communists.”<sup>9</sup>

This weakness of the local communist elite is the most probable root of the discussion that took place during the Second Communist Party Conference about whether to use the Komi-Permyak language (native for 85 percent of the okrug population at that time) in communist propaganda and education at all. (Paradoxically, the main support for using the native language came from an ethnic Russian member of the oblast Communist Party committee, who was supervising the conference.)<sup>10</sup>

Komi-Permyak leaders of that time deserve respect for being fully aware of the crucial importance of education to the further development of the autonomy and of its population. Education received the largest allocations in the okrug budgets for 1925 (33.5 percent of the total) and 1926 (35 percent). But those plans were threatened by an enormous budget deficit (45 percent in 1925 and 59.6 percent in 1926) that should have been covered by oblast and republic transfers.<sup>11</sup> The most important goal of the autonomy (and in the view of many Komi-Permyaks probably the only reason for its existence) could thus be achieved only through the mercy of the supreme authorities. The situation remained in principle unchanged in Soviet and post-Soviet times.

Nevertheless, cultural development was the only successful fruit of the Komi-Permyak autonomy. A semiofficial equation existed in Soviet times between the level of official autonomy and the kinds of educational, scientific, and cultural institutions that the autonomy had the right to create (a union republic was allowed to establish its own academy of sciences, an autonomous republic a research institute of history, linguistics, and literature, etc.). The only such institutions that were supposed to be established in the autonomous okrug were native secondary schools. Despite that tradition, Komi-Permyak okrug became the only one in the Soviet Union to have its own theater and a magazine of native literature written in both Russian and Komi-Permyak.

The successful development of cultural institutions in the autonomous okrug created a strong sense of linguistic (and, broadly speaking, cultural) identity among Komi-Permyaks. According to the 1989 census, 75.9 percent of Komi-Permyaks living in Perm oblast (including the autonomous okrug) considered the Komi-Permyak language to be their native tongue (the figure among those living in the autonomous okrug itself was 82.9 percent). Among all the oblast's ethnic groups only Russians had a higher level of this important indicator of ethnic identity (99.9 percent).<sup>12</sup> Table 3 shows a much lower (though gradually rising) level of linguistic Russification among native inhabitants of the okrug in comparison with their counterparts living in other parts of Perm oblast. Also noteworthy is the high level of command of Russian as a second language (even higher among Komi-Permyaks living in the okrug), which reflects strong traditions of interethnic cooperation among the ethnic groups of Perm oblast. But this refers to the language spoken daily. One can now find few Komi-Permyaks speaking the “high” language of Komi-Permyak literature—except, ironically, those who grad-

**TABLE 3**  
**Percentage of Komi-Permyaks Using Russian**  
**as a Native or Second Language, 1959–89**

	1959		1979		1989	
	In Komi-Permyak okrug	In Perm oblast (excluding the okrug)	In Komi-Permyak okrug	In Perm oblast (excluding the okrug)	In Komi-Permyak okrug	In Perm oblast (excluding the okrug)
Russian as native language	7.6	52.75	12.9	41.9	17.1	47.8
Russian as second language	n/a	n/a	69.6	55.6	70.2	49.7

*Sources: Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1959 goda. RSFSR (Moscow: Goskomstat, 1963), 326; Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1979 goda.—tom 4, kniga 1 (Moscow: Goskomstat, 1989), 305, 310; Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1989 goda.—tom 7, chast 1 (Minneapolis, 1992), 550–51, 558–59.*

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One may wonder why the Komi-Permyak autonomy emerged at all in the absence of virtually any ethnonational organization among the people or any mobilizing program among the leaders. One might also wonder why the Soviet Union (and later Russia) agreed to support the idea of the autonomy after several years of neglecting it at best. In my view, the most probable explanation is the following. Facing the urgent need for new administrative divisions of the huge emerging country, the Soviet Union, its leaders considered minor experiments to be useful. Komi-Permyak lands seemed almost ideal as a test site: the same absence of ethnic organization guaranteed the absence of any disturbances in case of either success or failure of the experiment. This became the background for fulfillment of the "long-time dream of Permian people," as it was expressed by the partisans of autonomy. If this explanation is true, it may support the more general understanding of the ethnoadministrative division during the 1920s and 1930s as having very little to do with the fulfillment of real ethnical aspirations and of Soviet ethnopolitics in general as not more than a by-product of activity in other fields of state government.

Through all the decades of its existence, the Komi-Permyak okrug remained economically a subordinate source of raw materials for more industrialized neighbors, living mostly on its wood resources. The price of the unprocessed outgoing goods was low, leaving the okrug with extremely low incomes. At the same time, the highly centralized Soviet system of economic management severely restrict-

ed possibilities to use even those means that were in local possession. Poor economic performance caused low living standards, which in turn resulted in a widespread desire to migrate. During the last thirty years of Soviet power, the okrug lost one-third of its population. The ethnic composition of the population did not change considerably, as the migration included both Komi-Permyaks and Russians, but the okrug can now hardly be viewed as the ethnic homeland of Komi-Permyaks, as only three-fifths of them live in its territory (see tables 4 and 5).

One of the important results of the Komi-Permyaks' migration from the okrug is their urbanization. According to the 1989 census, the population inside the okrug was 30 percent urban (in the mid-1990s it dropped to 27.4–28.3 percent,

**TABLE 4**  
**Ethnodemographic Data for Komi-Permyak Okrug, 1959–89**

	1959	1970	1979	1989
Total population, in thousands	236	n/a	172	158
Percentage of Komi-Permyaks in total okrug population	54.1	58.3	61.4	60.2
Percentage of Russians in total okrug population	38.3	36.0	34.7	36.1
Percentage of Komi-Permyaks living in okrug whose native language is Komi-Permyak	92.2	n/a	87.0	82.9
Percentage of Komi-Permyaks in Soviet Union living in okrug	88	n/a	70	62

*Source:* Oleg V. Kotov, Mikhail B. Rogachev, Yu. P. Shabaev, *Sovremennye Komi* (Yekaterinburg: Yekaterinburgskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1996), 24–25.

**TABLE 5**  
**Population Changes in Perm Oblast and Komi-Permyak Okrug**  
**(per 1,000 persons)**

	1995		1997		1998	
	Oblast	Okrug	Oblast	Okrug	Oblast	Okrug
Births	9.2	11.2	9.0	11.0	9.5	11.7
Deaths	15.8	16.2	13.9	16.9	13.3	14.7
Natural growth of population	-6.6	-5.0	-4.9	-5.7	-3.8	-4.0
Migrational growth of population	1.8	-5.5	1.3	-7.4	1.2	-2.7

*Sources:* *Permskaya oblast v tsifrakh. Statisticheskii sbornik* (Perm: Permskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1999), 72–73.



compared to 75.7 percent among the population of Perm oblast), while three-fourths of Komi-Permyaks living elsewhere were urban residents. This could be regarded as a benefit for emigrants, but according to modern ethnologists, "Komi have not created their own traditional culture of urban life." As a result they are quickly assimilated when they arrive in cities.<sup>13</sup>

The post-Soviet shift in economic and administrative relations in Russia didn't improve the situation. A reduction in housing and industrial building reduced the demand for timber; prospects for federal allocations became even dimmer than before. Centralized supplies of food and consumer goods were constantly cut back; in 1995–98, for example, there were shortages in nineteen of twenty-one food and consumer items bound for Komi-Permyak okrug. In the second half of the 1990s the okrug's industry started slowly to recover, as did the Russian economy as a whole. But while in 1998 the income of Perm oblast was 112 percent of the 1997 income, the okrug only managed to diminish its losses from 77 to 65 million rubles.<sup>14</sup> The okrug economy continues to be based heavily on raw materials, with only a tiny processing sector. In the mid-1990s, for example, the timber-cutting industry produced 50 percent of the district's production, while the woodworking industry produced only 1 percent. In the same way the district exports between 50 and 100 percent of its agricultural products without processing them.<sup>15</sup> Industrial equipment is aged and sometimes hazardous. Only 2 to 14 percent of polluting agents are caught by filters; in the city of Perm 71–82 percent is caught. As a result, the level of atmospheric pollution is virtually the same in Perm, with its highly developed chemical and machine-building industry, and in the okrug's only city, Kudymkar, which is hardly industrial at all: respectively, forty-seven and forty-three kilos of pollutants per capita in 1998.<sup>16</sup>

These hardly inspiring economic conditions greatly contribute to a gloomy social situation in the okrug. Though mortality decreased in recent years, so did the birth rate, while infant mortality also increased. Both natural and migrational population growth are negative, though the figures are slowly moving to zero. Some causes of death are also indicative of very difficult socioeconomic conditions. In 1998, 50.5 deaths of every 100,000 in the oblast were due to suicide; for the okrug it was 83.6. In the same year, alcohol poisoning caused 36.4 deaths per 100,000 in the oblast, and 63.4 in the okrug.

One of very few positive developments to occur during recent years was the weakening of the okrug's dependence on Perm oblast in education and culture. Though the specialized Komi-Permyak division of the Perm State Teachers' Training University went out of existence in the 1990s, the first higher educational institution appeared in Kudymkar itself in 1999—a semiautonomous branch of the Izhevsk Teachers' Training Institute. (Izhevsk is a capital of the Udmurtian republic; its main population—the Udmurts—also belong to the Finno-Ugrian population and thus are remote relatives of the Komi-Permyaks.)

In 1990 the Komi-Permyak okrug leadership decided to secede from the Perm region and to establish direct relations with Russia's federal authorities, which can be regarded as one of the results of Boris Yeltsin's famous appeal to autonomies to take "as much of sovereignty as you can swallow." However, the

okrug's virtually complete economic dependence on Perm oblast, especially in transportation, energy, and food supplies, made the decision merely a declaration, and soon it was officially canceled. The okrug's population itself, after a brief initial euphoria, rated the decision negatively. According to a 1999 poll by the Inter-regional Foundation of Political Initiatives and Technologies, only 1.3 percent of okrug residents approved its "sovereignization," 1.6 percent answered that "sovereignty" made their lives better, and 1.5 percent were against full-scale restoration of relations with Perm oblast.<sup>17</sup>

But in 1993 the okrug again became independent from Perm oblast, this time without any initiative on its population's part. According to Russia's constitution of

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1993, such autonomous okruga were equated with oblasti and autonomous republics under the common name of "subject of Federation." The situation that emerged was paradoxical: the okrug's territory was still considered to be part of the oblast's, but politically the okrug was now equal to the oblast. The situation resembled the period when both the Soviet

Union as a whole and constituent union republics were named "a state" in different articles of the constitution of 1977.

In 1997 the oblast and okrug administrations made attempts to regulate their new relations. A treaty on the basics of the relations was signed. Later, similar agreements were concluded between oblast and okrug legislatures (*Zakonodatelnye sobrania*) and between the administrations of the okrug and of Perm city. All those agreements either flatly declared or presumed establishment of "common space" in economy, law, transportation, and so on. But basic constitutional principles of the Russian Federation oppose creation of such space even when de facto it is ready to emerge. Important is that all those shifts in oblast-okrug interrelations didn't cause any open political or ethnopolitical tensions between the two "subjects of Federation."

Long-term economic, social, and (to some extent) cultural interests force the okrug to restore full-scale cooperation with the oblast, while administrative and political reasons (as, for example, the desire among some local political actors to gain electoral publicity) slow down that movement. The same can be said about the oblast's interests in and attitudes toward the okrug. Part of the okrug's population pin hopes for real sovereignty on oil extraction and on the newly planned railway Belkomur, which should provide the okrug with new economic connections (to Arkhangelsk oblast, Komi republic, etc.). Both projects can really diminish the okrug's economic dependence on Perm oblast, but prospects for both are not clear. Though oil extraction has already started, it is managed by companies officially registered elsewhere; according to Russian law this allows them to pay

only minimal taxes to the okrug budget or to escape such payments altogether. Meanwhile, the autonomous okrug still de facto lives on oblast subsidies; some economic projects important only (or mostly) to the okrug are heavily financed by the budget of the oblast. In 1998, for example, 300,000 rubles were allocated from the okrug budget for the above-mentioned railway construction, while 500,000 came from the oblast.

During the turbulent years of perestroika, the ethnically mixed composition of the regional population gave birth to nightmarish ideas of ethnically autonomous villages, especially in the oblast's southern part, where Russians living in a Tatar-Bashkir environment were frightened by prospects of growing Tatar nationalism presumably inspired from Kazan. Some also clamored to change the borders of Komi-Permyak okrug to better accommodate them to ethnic divisional lines, or to establish a Russian autonomous territory inside the Komi-Permyak autonomy. Fortunately, neither of those projects even came close to realization.

Instead, some of the ethnic minorities in Perm oblast have chosen extraterritorial or ethnocultural autonomy. Such autonomies (under different names) already exist among the oblast's Jews and (to some extent) Germans, a considerable number of whom descend from Volga Germans forcefully resettled in 1944, who thus have reasonable suspicion of official Moscow ethnopolitics. The largest and most influential extraterritorial autonomy emerged in 1989 under the name of Tatar-Bashkir Societal Center. Besides the city of Perm, such centers were founded in four other cities and four rural rayony of Perm oblast.<sup>18</sup> On 27 September 1998, all those centers joined to form the Regional National-Cultural Autonomy of Tatars and Bashkirs of Perm oblast (RNKATB).<sup>19</sup> Founded according to Russia's federal law "On national-cultural autonomy," the new society is part of Russia's federal national-cultural autonomy of Tatars and Bashkirs, together with those of Irkutsk, Moscow, Orenburg, Samara, Sverdlovsk, and Tiumen regions.

The main aim of RNKATB is to promote ethnically based education and enlightenment. It supervises Tatar and Bashkir secondary schools (of which more than a hundred exist in Perm oblast), language courses, and child care centers. Symbolically, it was the director of one such child care center who headed the Tatar-Bashkir societal center and now heads the RNKATB. The autonomy's role is also "visible" (in its own view) in regular *sabantui*—traditional annual competitions and festivals aimed at development and promotion of Tatar and Bashkir arts and culture as well as knowledge of ethnic traditions.<sup>20</sup> Though the RNKATB is a secular institution, it maintains contact and some cooperation with Islamic institutions of Perm oblast.

According to the present Russian laws, a national-cultural autonomy has no rights to a legally established administrative institution. Despite its official name (and despite the Austro-Marxist ideas of the early twentieth century, from which the term was borrowed), the RNKATB is more a kind of voluntary society. Nevertheless, it exercises considerable influence through formal and informal links with numerous Tatars and Bashkirs occupying important positions in the government of Perm oblast. Those ethnic groups were traditionally heavily represented among engineers and technicians of the oblast, as well as (to a slightly

lesser extent) in the medical field. Official Soviet internationalism helped many of them climb the administrative ladder. The board of RNKATB includes, among others, the director-general of the West Ural Association of Electricity Producers, and several well-known editors and journalists.<sup>21</sup> Of great importance is the generally compassionate attitude of the oblast administration (not to mention rayony administrations in the oblast's south, heavily populated by Tatars and Bashkirs) toward the oblast's more than 200,000 Tatars and Bashkirs—at least as voters.<sup>22</sup> As a minor example one can take the fact that during the oblast's gubernatorial election in 1996, the only non-Russian electoral posters were in the Tatar language.

One may wonder whether there exists any coherent ethnopolitics at the oblast level in Perm (signs of which were mentioned above) and whether oblast or lower-level authorities may claim some respect for interethnic “peaceful coexistence.” A special department for interethnic relations exists in the oblast administration, as does a committee in the oblast legislature that deals with the subject as part of wider social problems. The committee regularly adopts programs of activity (usually for two to three years), which partly resemble declarations of intents and partly Soviet-style “lists of measures for further widening of friendship among peoples.” But in my opinion (based mostly on my personal experience as a Perm resident) none of this has much influence on the actual situation.

The real “ethnopolitics” is the continual desire of the oblast administration (as well as most city, rayony, and other administrations) not to force any new inventions, such as the revision of territorial units, and at the same time not to block the way of ethnosocial activity unless it violates the law. That style of administration may be in part the result of the overall calm political situation in the oblast, but the main reasons are a centuries-long tradition of cooperation and the unattractive examples of some other Russian regions where ethnopolitics was used as a tool of short-term interests. Of great importance also is the pronounced commitment to coexistence by societal leaders who have considerable influence among their ethnic groups. For example, Perm oblast mufti Muhammedghali Khuzin is usually the first to condemn any signs of religion-related extremism, whether in Perm oblast itself or elsewhere, as well as any signs of antireligious attitudes on the part of authorities.<sup>23</sup> As a result, ethnopolitics disappears as a specific branch of the administration. What is left is mostly routine decision-making about education, housing, the fuel supply, and so on, as well as checking on how the statutes of volunteer societies fit the demands of the law.

All this doesn't mean that Perm oblast is a paradise of peace. The best intentions of top administrators can be (and often are) spoiled by bureaucracy, and *Russkoe Natsionalnoe Edinstvo*, the racist all-Russian political movement, has branches in and around Perm. The ambiguous status of the Komi-Permyak autonomous okrug's administrative and territorial relations with the oblast also may pose problems in some circumstances. Not so long ago public opinion reflected considerable fear: According to a 1993 poll by the Societal Monitoring Sector of the oblast administration, 32 percent of the population thought that overt interethnic conflicts were possible in Perm oblast (though in the early 1990s that attitude reflected more the Russian than the local situation).<sup>24</sup> But the Perm oblast

and Komi-Permyak okrug experience shows that even severe problems and potential for tensions do not mean inevitable conflict.

Though only a small-scale case, ethnopolitical developments in Perm oblast teach some interesting lessons. First, as I noted before, local history sheds some light on the reasons behind Soviet ethnopolitics and ethnoterritorial division in general. In the view of the highest Soviet authorities it was not more than a means for solving economic and administrative problems, but the establishment of ethnoterritorial autonomies over time helped to create local elites and administrative institutions that, in their turn, promoted the crystallization of localism and nationalism—important factors in the destruction of the Soviet Union. The means thus led to an additional fatal end.

Second, the Komi-Permyak experience shows that ethnoterritorial autonomy does not guarantee an ethnic group's prosperity. Even the best achievements of the autonomous okrug (which, one should remember, was a kind of model autonomy—the first in its class in the Soviet Union, heir to a long-term and highly mythicized tradition of interethnic coexistence) in the fields of education and arts were always threatened by outside bureaucratic interference. Hardly anybody among the Soviet authorities ever desired to restrict Komi-Permyaks; the authorities simply were not aware of the existence of some specific group interests, nor of the existence of such interests among the population of Perm oblast as a whole or, for that matter, among Russians as a people in the Soviet Union. As a result, residents of the autonomous okrug hardly gained much more than, say, the Tatars and Bashkirs of Perm oblast, who have never had ethnoterritorial autonomy but who have native schools, newspapers, artists, and so on. Only time will tell whether the newly established RNKATB will secure better prospects for its ethnic group than the autonomous okrug did in the past, but the comparison of their records is instructive.

#### NOTES

1. *International Affairs* 71, no. 2 (April 1995): 417.

2. Ancient and medieval sources name Permyaks, Voguls, Ostiaks, and others among those peoples. Presently, only Komi-Permyaks have preserved their identity (not to be confused with Komi, who occupy the territories to the north of the Perm region and possess their own autonomous republic—one of present Russia's eighty-nine constituent parts). This small ethnic group is hardly known to anybody beyond Russian borders except experts in ethnology. To the best of my knowledge, the only Western scholar dealing with Komi-Permyaks is Seppo Lallukka from Finland. For valuable historical and ethnological details see his "Territorial and Demographic Foundations of Komi-Permiak Nationality," *Nationalities Papers* 23, no. 2 (1995), and *Komipermjakit-peramaan kansa* (Helsinki: Itä-Euroopan Instituutti, 1995).

3. *Popov Ye. Velikopermskaya i Permskaya Yeparkhiya (1379–1879 gg.)* (Perm: Permskaya Yeparyika, 1879), 24.

4. "Soobrazheniya Glavnogo Upravleniya torgovli I promyshlennosti Uralskogo oblastnogo pravitelstva po voprosu o territorii, podlezhashchei upravleniyu silami I sredstvami pravitelstva Urala," *Uralskii oblastnik* (August 1991): 78.

5. Both Russia's Soviet Federal Socialist Republic, as one of the constituent republics of the Soviet Union, and the present Russian Federation are divided into several dozen oblast and krai (plural oblasti and kraya, respectively)—units established on a purely ter-

ritorial basis—and *avtonomnye respubliki*, which have an ethnoterritorial basis. *Oblast* is usually translated as “region,” though in present Russian parlance the term “region” can point to any administrative unit. *Krai* may be translated as either “region” or “land”; in its essence it doesn’t differ from the oblast except that the oblast is usually larger. Oblast, krai, and respublika (the last recently lost the adjective *avtonomnaya*) in their turn are divided into rayony (singular rayon)—rural self-governing units whose name is usually translated as “district” and which could be equated to counties in the United States or to *Landkreise* in Germany. Rayony may include smaller towns, while bigger cities (*goroda oblastnogo podchinenia*) occupy the same administrative level as rural rayon. An okrug (plural okrug) in Soviet times was an intermediate level between oblast and rayon. This ethnoterritorial unit was subordinate to the oblast and composed part of its territory, while itself being divided into several rayon. The direct translation for okrug is also “district,” which may cause some confusion. According to Russia’s constitution of 1993, all the oblasti, kraya, respubliki, and okruga are equal in their rights and in their relations to the federal authorities, though in real life some of them are “more equal” than others due to unconstitutional unilateral preferences forced by the federal government.

6. State Archives of Modern History and Socio-Political Movements of Perm region (GANIOPD), collection 200, inventory 1, file 66, pp. 21–22.

7. Protokol Vtoroi Komi-Permyatskoi okružnoi partiinoi konferentsii (17–21 noyabrya 1925 goda), GANIOPD, collection 200, inventory 1, file 2, p. 19 reverse.

8. Protokol Pervoi Komi-Permyatskoi okružnoi partiinoi konferentsii, GANIOPD, collection 200, inventory 1, file 1, p. 98; file 2, p. 13 reverse.

9. Protokol Pervoi, GANIOPD, collection 200, inventory 1, file 1, pp. 52–53; file 2, p. 13 reverse.

10. Protokol Vtoroi, GANIOPD, collection 200, inventory 1, file 2, pp. 12 reverse, 15, 16.

11. Protokol Vtoroi, GANIOPD, collection 200, inventory 1, file 2, p. 22 reverse.

12. *Materialy po Permskoi oblasti k Uralskoi istoricheskoi entsiklopedii.—Vypusk 1* (Perm: Permskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1994), 40–41.

13. *Permskaya oblast v tsifrakh. Statisticheskii sbornik* (Perm: Permskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1999), 71; Oleg V. Kotov, Mikhail B. Rogachev, Yu. P. Shabaev, *Sovremennye Komi* (Yekaterinburg: Yekaterinburgskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1996), 24–25.

14. *Permskaya oblast v tsifrakh*, 58.

15. *Permskaya oblast: otrasli, regiony, goroda* (Perm: Permskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1997), 240; *Riossiiskaya gazeta*, 28 August 1992.

16. *Permskaya oblast v tsifrakh*, 87.

17. *Zvezda*, 25 May 1999.

18. *Zvezda*, 26 August 1999.

19. *Zvezda*, 3 October 1998, 26 August 1999. One should remember that the term “national” in Russia is still most often used to mean “ethnic.”

20. *Kapital-Weekly* (Perm), 29 April 1998.

21. *Zvezda*, 7 October 1999.

22. *Novyi kompanon* (Perm), 17 November 1998.

23. *Zvezda*, 19 December 1998, 28 May 1999, 21 August 1999, 14 October 1999.

24. I am indebted to the Societal Monitoring Sector’s head Viktor Burko for these figures.