

Russia = MultiNATIONAL

Russia: The Largest Multiethnic State

LEARNING OUTCOME 8.2.3

Understand Russia's status as a multiethnic state.

RUSSIA: THE LARGEST MULTINATIONAL STATE

During its existence between 1922 and 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) was the world's largest state in land area, as well as the world's largest multinational state. The Soviet Union consisted of 15 republics, based on its 15 largest ethnicities. According to estimates a year before the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russians comprised 51 percent of the state's population, Ukrainians 15 percent, Uzbeks 6 percent, and the remaining 28 percent spread among more than 100 other ethnicities officially recognized by the Soviet government.

The breakup of the U.S.S.R. in 1991 resulted in the conversion of the 15 republics into 15 independent states (Figure 8-17). These 15 states consist of five groups:

- Russia.
- Three Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.
- Three European states: Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine.
- Five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.
- Three Caucasus states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Some of these new states are good examples of nation-states, and some are clearly multiethnic. However, the best examples of nation-states are not necessarily the most stable and peaceful of the new states.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia is now the world's largest multinational state. Russia comprises 81 percent ethnic Russians, but the government officially recognizes the existence of 39 ethnic groups among the remaining 19 percent.

Russia's ethnicities are clustered in two principal locations (Figure 8-18). Some are located along borders with neighboring states, including Buryats and Tuvian near Mongolia, and Chechens, Dagestani, Kabardins, and Ossetians near the two former Soviet republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia. Other ethnicities are clustered in the center of Russia, especially between the Volga River basin and the Ural Mountains. Among the most numerous in this region are Bashkirs, Chuvash, and Tatars, who speak Altaic languages similar to Turkish, and Mordvins and Udmurts, who speak Uralic languages similar to Finnish. Most of these groups were conquered by the Russians in the sixteenth century, under the leadership of Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible).



▲ FIGURE 8-17 SOVIET UNION The U.S.S.R. consisted of 15 republics that have become independent states.

Russia's constitution grants autonomy over local government affairs to around two dozen of the most numerous ethnicities. Local government units with a large ethnic population are allowed to designate the ethnic language as an official language in addition to Russian. Nonetheless, independence movements are flourishing among several of Russia's ethnicities.

RUSSIANS IN UKRAINE

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, prospects for a stable nation-state were favorable in independent Ukraine because it possessed economic assets, such as coal deposits, a steel industry, and proximity to the wealthy countries of Western Europe. However, Ukraine's minority Russian population started an uprising in the eastern region of the country, where they were clustered (Figure 8-19). Claiming that the Russian ethnic minority in Ukraine was endangered, Russia invaded eastern Ukraine and seized Crimea.

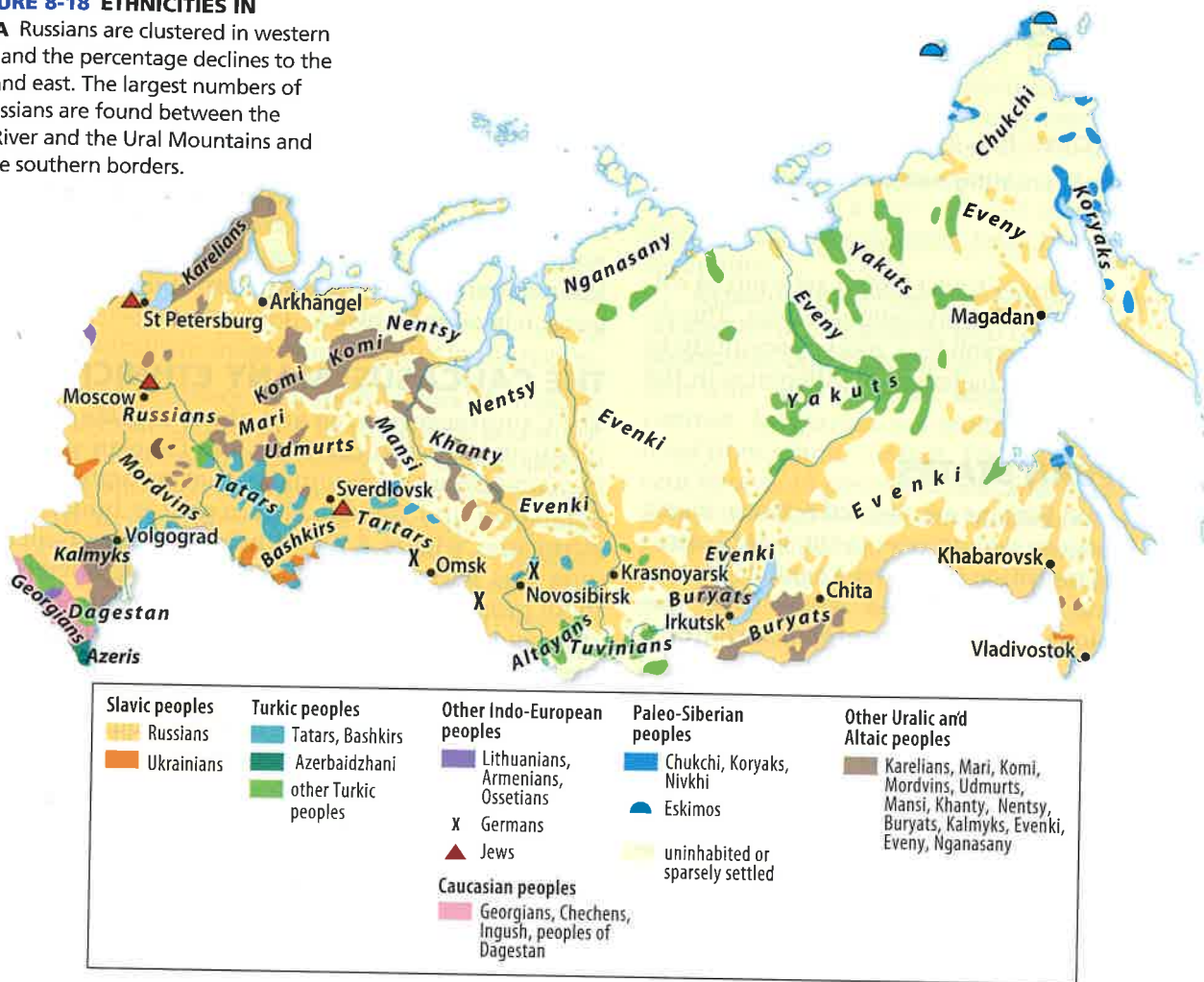
Crimea, a 27,000-square-kilometer (10,000-square-mile) peninsula, has long been an area of conflict (Figure 8-20). Crimea's population is approximately 60 percent Russian, 24 percent Ukrainian, 10 percent Tatar, and 6 percent other ethnicities.

Russia took control of Crimea in 1783, and in 1921 it became an autonomous republic within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, which in turn was a republic within the Soviet Union. In 1954, the Soviet government transferred responsibility for Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, which was then also part of the Soviet Union.

When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, Crimea became an autonomous republic in the newly independent Ukraine. In 2014, Russia invaded Crimea and annexed it,

▼ **FIGURE 8-18 ETHNICITIES IN**

RUSSIA Russians are clustered in western Russia, and the percentage declines to the south and east. The largest numbers of non-Russians are found between the Volga River and the Ural Mountains and near the southern borders.



claiming that the majority of the Crimean people, who are ethnic Russians, supported the action. Nearly every other country in the world continues to recognize Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea. However, the international community has not found a way to remove the Russians and restore Crimea to Ukraine.

PAUSE & REFLECT 8.2.3

Why is most of Russia classified as sparsely settled? Compare the map of Russia's ethnicities (Figure 8-18) with the maps of world climate (Figure 1-47) and of population concentrations (Figure 2-4).



▲ **FIGURE 8-19 ETHNICITIES IN UKRAINE** The Russian ethnic minority is clustered in the east of the country, near the border with Russia.



▲ **FIGURE 8-20 CRIMEA** Russia claims sovereignty over Crimea, but most other states consider it legally still part of Ukraine.