



## Design Analysis

The flags of Russia's federal subjects reveal trends in flag design when studied and analyzed. Each flag was investigated to confirm that it was, indeed, an official flag of the region. In several cases a flag shown on a website or in a flag catalog was not an official symbol and the federal subject had not yet adopted a flag. In addition, with the consolidations that have occurred since 2005 the status of some flags has become unclear. Several consolidated territories have continued to use the flag of the main territory or district, while others have formed commissions to work on new symbols. As of 23 September 2009, 81 of the 83 federal subjects had officially adopted flags. These 81 were considered in this design analysis.

### Design Basics

Examination of the flags and coats of arms of the federal subjects reveal an interesting trend in subnational flag designs of the modern Russian Federation. While the vast majority of the flag designs were created since 1991, the legacy of traditional Russian heraldry is quite evident. Of the 81 federal subjects with flags, 66 (81%) of them have flags based at least in part upon their coats of arms. Seven flags (9%) are armorial banners which replicate the shields of the arms. Another 24 (30%) incorporate the full coat of arms into the designs. Most numerous are the flags that include at least one element from the arms—35 flags or 43% of all flags.

To identify other trends in flag design, the 81 flags initially were divided into four basic categories: solid fields, striped fields, quartered/crossed flags, and diagonally-divided fields. The majority of the flags (72%) have striped designs. There are also a significant number with solid fields (22%). Four flags are quartered or crossed, and one flag is divided into diagonal stripes. In addition, five flags have triangles at the hoist, one of these has a solid field and four are striped.

Basic Designs	Flags	Percentage
Solid fields	18	22%
Striped fields	58	72%
Quartered/crossed	4	5%
Diagonally-divided	1	1%
[Triangle at hoist also]	[5]	[6%]

Figure 2. Basic designs of the flags of the Federal Subjects.

Of the striped flags, 46 include charges and 12 have no additional symbols other than the stripes. There are many more horizontal than vertical stripes. On 14% of the striped flags a single vertical stripe is at either the hoist or fly. Four of the striped flags also have triangles at the hoist.

Striped Flag Designs	Flags	Percentage of Striped Flags
With symbols	46	79%
Without symbols	12	21%
Horizontal	44	76%
Vertical	15	26%
Single stripe at hoist/fly	8	14%
Triangle at hoist	4	7%

Figure 3. Striped flags by category.

The national flag of Russia is both a tribar flag and a tricolor flag. Tribars are divided into three stripes—horizontally, vertically, or diagonally. On the Russian flag the stripes are horizontal. Tricolor refers to the fact that the flag has a field of three colors. Both tribar and tricolor designs are popular worldwide, and the same is true of the federal subjects. Among the flags of the federal subjects, 20 are horizontal tribars and 17 are tricolors. In addition, three flags give the impression of horizontal tricolored tribar flags, except that some of their stripes are scalloped on the top edge.<sup>8</sup>

One final aspect of basic flag design that should be discussed is the proportions. Flag proportions are usually described as the ratio of the width of the flag

8. For more information on tribar flags, see “Triband (flag)”, *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triband\\_\(flag\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triband_(flag)), accessed 27 August 2008; for more information on tricolors, see “Tricolour”, *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tricolour>, accessed 27 August 2008.

(measured top to bottom at the hoist) to the length of the flag (the distance from the hoist to the fly). Most of the flags of Russia's federal subjects use one of two proportions—1:2 or 2:3. Nearly a quarter use the ratio of 1:2, the proportions of the old Soviet flag. However, over the years a number of federal subjects have changed their flags to 2:3, the proportions of the current Russian tricolor, so that today the majority of Russia's subnational flags match the proportions of the national flag. Two of the federal subjects use unique proportions: the Republic of Chuvashia (5:8) and Penza Oblast (1:1.6).

## Colors Used in the Flags

No study of flags would be complete without a discussion of the colors used. Color is so significant that many flags use color alone for their symbolism. Determining which colors to count was not as easy as it might sound. One possible technique would have been to count only "field" colors, but this presented some issues. For example, consider a flag with a triangle at the hoist and two stripes at the fly—is the triangle a symbol or would that color count? What about the color of a large cross that extends to all four sides of the flag? A number of the flags include scalloped or wavy stripes representing water. Are these stripes symbols or are they part of the field? In some cases (such as that of Leningrad Oblast) it is clear that the wavy stripes are more than symbols; they are intended to present the image of a striped field. And what about fimbriation colors—should they be counted? The federal subjects tend to assign meaning to all the colors used, demonstrating that they are considered important to the design. So, rather than approaching the question strictly as a vexillologist, it was posed from the perspective of residents of the federal subject—if asked about the colors of their flag, what would they say? Using this point of view, all of the principal colors used in the fields of the flags were counted—those used in solid backgrounds, all stripes in the field, hoist triangles, crosses, and scalloped/wavy lines. Colors used in arms, symbols, and disks (since they are part of the symbols) were not counted. For example, the rainbow on the flag of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast was considered to be a symbol, rather than seven stripes, based on the consistency across various descriptions where the flag was described as white with a rainbow and color meanings were not assigned to the individual rainbow colors.

The flags of the federal subjects demonstrate variety in the number of colors used. 17 flags (21%) have only one color in their fields. Bicolored flags total 22, or 27% of all the flags. The influence of the national flag might well explain the number of flags which use three colors—35, or 43%. Finally, 7 flags (9%) use four or more colors.

Colors Used	Flags	Percentage
One	17	21%
Two	22	27%
Three	35	43%
Four or more	7	9%

Figure 4. Number of colors used.

Color choice in flags is influenced by a variety of factors. In every culture certain colors have specific significance and symbolism. This is true in ethnic Russian culture as well as in the cultures of Russia's many minority groups. Historical influences can also affect the color choice. The colors used in many flags of the federal subjects have been influenced by past flags of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and by the current national flag of the Russian Federation. Each region of Russia has chosen its own flag colors, and each has assigned specific meanings or significance to those colors. While there is a great variety of meaning assigned to each color, and some meanings are assigned to more than one color, a number of trends emerged when the color symbolism was examined.

Color	Flags	Percentage
Red	55	69%
Blue	48	59%
White	45	56%
Green	25	31%
Yellow	16	20%
Black	3	4%
Silver	3	4%

Figure 5. Color usage in flags of the Federal Subjects.

Not surprisingly, red is used in the most flags—55 flags, or 69% of flag designs. For centuries, red has been an important color in ethnic Russian culture and has become the color most frequently used to represent the Russian people. In the Russian language the word for red is *krasnyi*, which originally meant “fair” or “beautiful”. In modern Russian it now shares a root with the words *krasota* and *krasivyi* which mean “beauty” and “beautiful”. For this reason, red has long been associated with beauty. Some flags also use red to represent love, feelings, mercy, and magnanimity. In some cases, red symbolizes labor, industry, economic devel-

opment, and progress. For other flags it might stand for democracy and authority, or even antiquity and continuity. Red can also be used to symbolize creation, the sun, fire, warmth, energy, life, health, maturity, and vitality. Probably the most significant meaning of red in the flags is its association with defense of the homeland. On many flags red represents the blood spilled in specific battles fought on the territory, heroism of the veterans, and defense preparedness. Red is historically tied to traits such as strength, masculinity, courage, bravery, fearlessness, boldness, selflessness, steadfastness, loyalty, and military valor. The importance of red has been a consistent force in Russian symbolism throughout history. It was an important color in the symbols of Muscovy, it was used during the height of Russian Empire, it was the dominant color in the symbolism of the Soviet Union, and it is still used heavily today.<sup>9</sup>

Blue is also popular in Russian subnational flags, used in 48 flags (59%). Like red, blue has long-standing status in the national symbolism of Russia. It was used in flags of Russia during the imperial period and in the flag of the Russian SFSR during the Soviet period. Unlike most languages, Russian has two distinctive words for “blue”—*sinii*, meaning dark blue; and *goluboi*, meaning light blue. In the flag descriptions, most federal subjects distinguish between the two blues, using either one or the other. Of the 48 flags that use blue, 30 use *sinii*, 14 use *goluboi*, and 4 designate their shade of blue as *lazurnyi* (meaning “azure”). Some, however, list multiple blues in their descriptions indicating that the exact shade can vary. To complicate matters, one flag’s *sinii* can resemble another flag’s *goluboi*, resulting in a wide variety of blues.<sup>10</sup> There are a number of meanings assigned to the color blue in the flag symbolism of the federal subjects. One of the most common is to use blue to represent parts of the natural environment such as the sky or bodies of water—rivers, lakes, seas, and oceans. Blue is also used to represent concepts such as beauty, love, happiness, well-being, peace, harmony, calmness, gentleness, hope, and freedom. In addition, blue is used to symbolize purity,

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9. Alexander and Barbara Pronin, *Russian Folk Arts* (South Brunswick, N.J.: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1975) p. 153; N. M. Shanskii, *Russian Word Formation* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1968), p. 39; Catherine A. Wolkonsky and Marianna A. Poltoratzky, *Handbook of Russian Roots* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 161-163; Virve Sarapik, “Red: the Colour and the Word”, *Folklore* v. 3 (1997), <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol3/red.htm>, p. [13], accessed 17 July 2008; Olga Dmitrieva, “Color Associations”, *Color Matters*, <http://www.colormatters.com/research/ColorAssociations.pdf>, accessed 17 July 2008.

10. Another complication is the usage of *goluboi* in post-Soviet Russian slang to mean “homosexual”. Perhaps the official descriptions have avoided this connotation by stating the color is *sinii*, while still using a light-blue color in their flags.

cleanliness, chastity, lofty aspirations, honor, virtue, honesty, sincerity, fairness, faithfulness, loyalty, and respect.<sup>11</sup>

White (*belyi*) is the third most popular color used in the flags of the federal subjects. It often represents cleanliness or purity, either of the natural environment or of the thoughts and intentions of the people. Other concepts symbolized by white are peace, love, happiness, tranquility, modesty, morality, innocence, truth, frankness, perfection, wisdom, nobility, honor, honesty, or well-being. In the Buddhist regions, it is often used to represent the milk or dairy products central to cultural practices and purification ceremonies. Concepts such as heaven, spirituality, and good are also associated with white. In many flags across the Russian Federation white is used to represent aspects of the natural environment such as light, the fragility of the land, snowy open spaces, the long, harsh Russian winters, and the northern regions in general.

Red, blue, and white are the national colors of Russia. The three colors are said to come from the arms of Moscow—red is the field color of the shield in the arms, St. George's horse is white, and his cape is blue. Using these established colors, Peter I (the Great) designed the first Russian white/blue/red tricolors as naval flags in the late 1690s. The Russian tricolor gained official status as the national flag in 1705. In Russian, this flag is sometimes referred to as *BESIK*, an acronym for the order of the colors in Russian (*belyi*, *sinii*, and *krasnyi*). Following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the tricolor was officially adopted as the flag of the Russian Federation. In vexillology white, blue, and red have become known as the “Pan-Slavic colors” because the Russian tricolor influenced the flags of many other Slavic countries. Just as Peter's tricolored flag influenced other Slavic flags, its influence can also be seen on a number of the federal subjects' flags. Most notable are those of Leningrad Oblast and Ulyanovsk Oblast which both use modified Russian tricolors as the fields of their flags, with the lower stripes scalloped to rep-

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11. Jonathan Winawer, Nathan Witthoft, Michael C. Frank, Lisa Wu, Alex R. Wade, and Lera Boroditsky, “Russian Blues Reveal Effects of Language on Color Discrimination”, *PNAS: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, v. 104 #19 (May 8, 2007), p. 7780-7785, <http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.0701644104>, accessed 17 July 2008; Greville Corbett and Gerry Morgan, “Colour Terms in Russian: Reflections of Typological Constraints in a Single Language”, *Journal of Linguistics*, v. 24 (1988), p. 31-64; Galina V. Paramei, “Singing the Russian Blues: An Argument for Culturally Basic Color Terms”, *Cross-Cultural Research*, v. 39 (2005), p. 10-38, <http://ccr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstracts/39/1/10>, accessed 17 July 2008; Brian James Baer, “Engendering Suspicion: Homosexual Panic in the Post-Soviet Detektiv”, *Slavic Review*, v. 64 #1 (Spring 2005), p. 24-42.

resent waves. In all, the three national colors are the basis for 11 flags (14%), and have been combined with at least one additional color in 6 flags (7%).<sup>12</sup>

In addition, some federal subjects have shown their unity with Russia by using the color combinations of two other historic Russian flags which use just two of the three colors. The first of these is the flag of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, which was red with a blue stripe at the hoist. Three current flags—those of Altai Krai, Kemerovo Oblast, and Vladimir Oblast—use the Russian SFSR flag as the basis of their designs. Two federal subjects (Kostroma Oblast and Voronezh Oblast) originally had flags of this type, but have since redesigned their flags. In all, the red/blue color combination is used in 15 flags (19%), often in combination with other colors. The second historical influence is the *Andreevskii* flag (white with a blue St. Andrew's cross)—the historic and current naval flag. Blue and white are combined (often with other colors) in 13 flags or 16% of the federal subjects. Many of these regions specifically cite this combination as representing their unity with the Russian Federation. The most notable examples of blue/white flags are those of the Altai Republic (which consists simply of blue and white stripes), and Arkhangelsk Oblast (which is based on the *Andreevskii* flag). In all, 45 of the 81 flags (56%) appear to have derived colors from the current and historic flags of Russia.<sup>13</sup>

After the national colors, the next most popular color is green (*zelënyi*). A number of flags use green almost certainly because of its status as the traditional color of Islam. While it is difficult to get an exact count of practicing Muslims in Russia, in eight republics Islam is either the religion of the majority or there is a significant Muslim population—Bashkortostan and Tatarstan in the Volga-Urals region and Adygea, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkessia in the Northern Caucasus region. The flags of all these republics include green. In other parts of Russia, green is used to represent the natural world—life, flora, the steppe, the taiga, meadows, fields, and forests. It is the color of spring and summer, so important after the long Russian winter.

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12. Evghennii Vladimirovich Pchelov, "Gosudarstvennyi flag", in *Gosudarstvennye simvoly Rossii: gerb, flag, gimn* (Moskva: Russkoe slovo, 2004) p. 81-102; "Flag Rossiiskoi iperii", *Vexillographia: Flagi Rossii*, <http://www.vexillographia.ru/russia/index.htm>, accessed 16 July 2008; Viktor Nikolaevich Saprykov, *Gosudarstvennaia simvolika regionov Rossii* (Moskva: Parad, 2006) p. 4-7; "Russia", *FOTW Flags of the World*, <http://www.crwflags.com/FOTW/flags/ru.htm>, accessed 16 July 2008.

13. *Ibid.*

Green also represents concepts such as life, hope, plenty, freedom, peace, revival, renewal, friendship, brotherhood, joy, health, fertility, prosperity, stability, youth, vitality, wisdom, and eternal life.<sup>14</sup>

Another color with some religious significance is yellow (*zhěltyi*). Like Islam in the Muslim republics, Buddhism has also played a role in color choices for the republics where that religion is practiced by the majority of the population. Most Buddhists in Russia practice Tibetan Buddhism, in which yellow has great religious significance. All three of the Buddhist republics—Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Tuva—have yellow in their flags. In other parts of the Russian Federation, yellow and gold are often considered synonymous in the descriptions of the flags. A number of meanings have been assigned to yellow/gold—peace, prosperity, spirituality, faith, happiness, health, well-being, wisdom, and knowledge. Because of its association with the color of ripe grain and the precious metal gold, yellow is frequently used to represent a rich harvest, abundance, prosperity, fertility, wealth, mineral resources, and good fortune. It is also used to symbolize greatness, power, durability, and constancy.<sup>15</sup>

Two other colors have been used in the flags of the federal subjects—black (*chěrnyi*) and silver (*serebrianyi*). Black represents stability, the land, and underground mineral wealth. It also symbolizes *chernozēm*—the rich black topsoil of central European Russia. In the portrayal of the flags, silver is often considered synonymous with white. It represents the concepts of light and purity of thoughts.

The colors used in the flags of the federal subjects reflect the diversity of the many regions of Russia, but they also link many of the regional flags to the country's history. In all, the array of subnational flags is both colorful and distinctive. The meanings assigned to these colors are equally diverse.

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14. Galina M. Yemelianova, "Russia", in *Muslim Cultures Today* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2006) pp. 147-148; U.S. Department of State, "International Religious Freedom Report 2007", <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90196.htm> (14 September 2007), accessed 21 July 2008.

15. "Republic of Bashkortostan", p. 175-179; "Republic of Kalykiya", p. 148-150; "Republic of Tyva", p. 244-246. in *The Territories of the Russian Federation 2007*.

## Symbols

A wide variety of symbols are used on the different flags of the federal subjects. In order to learn more about the types of symbols used, they were sorted into different categories. As some flags fit into multiple categories, they might be listed more than once.

### Symbols of Russia, the Tsars, and Nobility



*Figure 6. Symbols of the tsars and the Russian Empire on the flags of (from top to bottom) Kaluga Oblast, Tver Oblast, Kostroma Oblast, and Krasnodar Krai.*

In 1991 the Russian Federation readopted the flag and coat of arms of imperial Russia. The major element of the arms is the double-headed eagle whose heads symbolize both the European and Asian nature of Russia. Each head of the eagle wears a crown and a third crown tops the arms. In its right talon, the eagle holds a scepter topped with a Russian eagle; in his left talon he holds an orb, another traditional symbol of royal authority. In the center of the eagle are the arms of Moscow, which portray St. George the Victorious slaying a dragon.

Six federal subjects place the eagle from the Russian arms on their flags. In other cases, the federal subjects use symbols representing the tsars to show their unity with Russia. There are 19 flags with crowns in their arms. In addition, four flags have crowns as their principal symbols—those of Astrakhan Oblast, Kaluga Oblast, Tver Oblast, and Tyumen Oblast. The crowns on Tyumen Oblast's flag are stylized.

Orbs and scepters, traditional symbols of royal authority, are used on four flags (Vologda Oblast, Vladimir Oblast, Novgorod Oblast, and St. Petersburg). Thrones appear on the flags of Novgorod Oblast and Tver Oblast. The flag of Ryazan Oblast includes a prince as the central charge.

Imperial standards appear on three Russian subnational flags. An old imperial flag (gold with the Russian eagle) flies from the galleon on the flag of Kostroma Oblast and also appears on the arms of Orenburg Oblast. The flag of Krasnodar Krai has monogrammed banners of five rulers of the Russian Empire—Alexander I, Catherine II, Alexander II, Paul I, and Nicholas I. An imperial monogram—that of Empress Elizabeth Petrovna—appears on the flag of Kaliningrad Oblast.

## Religious Symbols

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union and the discontinuance of the “official atheism” of that era, there has been a resurgence of religion in the Russian Federation. This not only includes Russian Orthodoxy, the traditional religion of pre-Soviet Russia, but other religions which have been practiced in various regions for centuries. As a result, a number of flags of the federal subjects include religious symbols.

Christian symbols are the most common religious elements on the flags, especially crosses. They frequently appear on crowns or orbs, as a separate element in the arms, or as tall crosses borne by animals on the shields. Stavropol Krai’s flag has a map of the region with a white cross marking the city of Stavropol as the religious center of the region. It also reflects the city’s name—a Russified version of the Greek phrase meaning “The City of the Cross”. A cross also tops the book of the Gospels which Perm Krai’s bear carries upon its back, and is on the cover of the book as well. In addition, crosses divide the fields of Perm Krai, Stavropol Krai, Arkhangelsk Oblast, and Belgorod Oblast.

Religious figures also appear on several flags. The flags of Kirov Oblast and Volgograd Oblast show arms and hands extending from the clouds of heaven to bestow symbols of power and authority. Two flags (Moscow Oblast and the city of Moscow) feature St. George the Victorious, the patron saint of the region. Also, the flag of Arkhangelsk Oblast includes the Archangel Michael in the arms.



*Figure 7. Christian symbolism on the flags of (from top to bottom) Kirov Oblast, Perm Krai, and Penza Oblast.*

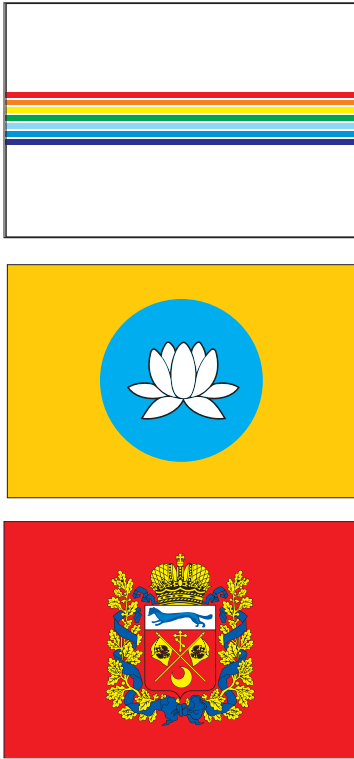


Figure 8: The rainbow, a biblical symbol, on the flag of (top) the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. The lotus, a traditional Buddhist symbol, on the flag of (center) Kalmykia. A cross symbolizing Russian Orthodoxy and the crescent moon representing Islam combined on the flag of Orenburg Oblast.

Perhaps the most striking depiction of Christian symbols, however, appears on the flag of Penza Oblast. This flag includes the face of Jesus from an icon called “*Spas Nerukotvornyi*” (“Our Savior Not Made by Hands”). The icon is based upon an orthodox tradition revolving around the Image of Edessa—a miraculous likeness of the face of Jesus which appeared on a rectangle of cloth, and is considered the first icon. It is also important to remember that icons are believed to take on the qualities of the saint portrayed. Therefore, the religious significance of this image of Christ transforms the flag itself into a type of icon. The flag also continues an old Russian tradition of using images of icons on flags. During the imperial period such flags were carried into battle by the troops of the Russian Empire.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to Christian symbols, symbols from other religions appear. For example, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast includes a rainbow on its flag—an Old Testament symbol of peace, happiness, and good. The seven stripes in the rainbow also represent the seven candles of a menorah, an important religious and cultural symbol of the Jewish people.

Buddhist symbolism appears on the flag of Kalmykia, which includes a white lotus flower—an important religious symbol for the people of the region because of its association with the life and teachings of the Buddha. The flower is one of the eight auspicious symbols and represents enlightenment. For this reason, the Buddha is often pictured sitting on a giant lotus flower.

The arms of Orenburg Oblast, which also appear on its flag, include both an Orthodox cross and a crescent moon. While most residents are Christian, approximately 20% of the population is Muslim. The other crescent moon appearing

16. *Simvoly i regalia Rossii* (Moskva: AST, 2006), p. 128-137; Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004), p. 6-7, 234-239.

on one of the flags is part of the *soyombo* symbol on Buryatia's flag. This region is predominantly Buddhist, and the *soyombo* is considered a cultural symbol rather than a religious one.

## Plants and Animals

A number of Russian subnational flags include plants and animals among their symbols. Many of the plants are in the form of wreaths which surround the shields in coats of arms. Wreath materials used include laurel, oak, and cedar branches as well as cereal grains—a popular theme in Soviet arms symbolizing agricultural productivity. Several flags of the federal subjects have retained this symbol, most notably Altai Krai, which has a large stalk of grain in a stripe at the hoist. Oryol Oblast and Kemerovo Oblast include stalks of grain as elements on the shields of their arms. One of the most prominent plants on the flags is the linden tree on the flag of Lipetsk Oblast. A spruce tree is the primary symbol on the arms on the flag of Bryansk Oblast. In addition, the Republic of Chuvashia also has a tree, but it is in the form of a highly-stylized Tree of Life. Several flags use flowers as their primary symbols—the Republic of Kalmykia has a large lotus flower and the Republic of Bashkortostan uses a stylized *kurai* flower.

Animals appear on 28 of Russia's subnational flags. All of these are drawn from the arms of the regions, with the majority being animals which appear on the shields of the arms. A number of the flags have wild animals—five have lions, three have bears, one has a tiger, and another has a deer. There are also flags with domesticated animals—one with a camel, three with horses, and one with a goat. Two flags include fur-bearing animals important to the culture of Russia—sables and martens. Eagles appear on eight flags (including



Figure 9. Animals from the flags of (from top to bottom) Yaroslavl Oblast (bear), Primorsky Krai (tiger), Chelyabinsk Oblast (camel), and Novosibirsk Oblast (sables).

six with double-headed eagles). In addition, one flag has partridges, three have fish, and another includes bees. Three of the flags show mythical animals—two have dragons (being killed by St. George) and one has a bird from Slavic mythology called a *gamayun*.

Perhaps the most unique animal on any of the flags, however, is the *babr* on the flag of Irkutsk Oblast. On first glance the animal looks as if it might be a large member of the *mustelidae* (or weasel) family. It is obviously carnivorous since it has a dead sable in its mouth. However, it looks quite different from a wolverine or badger. The *babr* is black with a head and body that look almost feline; its feet appear to be webbed, and it has a broad flattened tail. A little linguistic research reveals this animal's unique history. Apparently the word *babr* is an obsolete Russian word for tiger. In fact, an examination of the arms of the city of Irkutsk from 1790 clearly shows a tiger with a sable in its mouth. So, how did the *babr* become transformed to its current appearance? As the story goes, when the arms of various territories were being revised in Moscow in 1857 the unfamiliar word *babr* was replaced by the more familiar word *bobr*, which means beaver. The result was a strange black animal, part feline and part beaver. It is interesting that, despite the obvious error, this form of the *babr* is still being used. Perhaps it has been retained because of its distinctiveness.

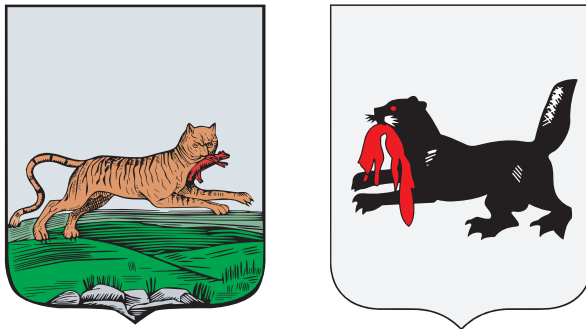


Figure 10. The babrs from the city arms (left) of Irkutsk (1790) and the arms of Irkutsk Oblast (today).

### People, Body Parts, and Human Images

Eight flags include people, body parts, or human images among their symbols. Ryazan Oblast's flag shows a prince from the arms of the territory. The flag of Volgograd Oblast includes a statue of Mother Russia called *Rodina-mat' zovet* (which generally translates as "The Motherland Calls"). All of the other flags include images of religious significance. Two of the flags (Moscow Oblast and that of the city of Moscow) include the patron saint of Moscow, St. George the Victorious, on his horse slaying a dragon. The Archangel Michael is shown vanquish-

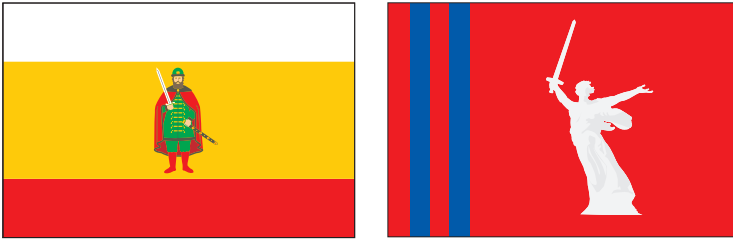


Figure 11. Figures on the flags of Ryazan Oblast (left) and Volgograd Oblast.

ing a demon in the arms on Arkhangelsk Oblast's flag. Penza Oblast's flag has an image of the face of Jesus from an icon called "*Spas Nerukotvornyi*". According to Orthodox tradition, a miraculous image of the face of Jesus on a rectangle of cloth was the first icon. The remaining two flags have arms and hands extending from the clouds (it is unclear if the arms belong to God or to an angel). On the flag of Kirov Oblast, the arm holds a bow and arrow; on Vologda Oblast's flag it holds an orb and sword.

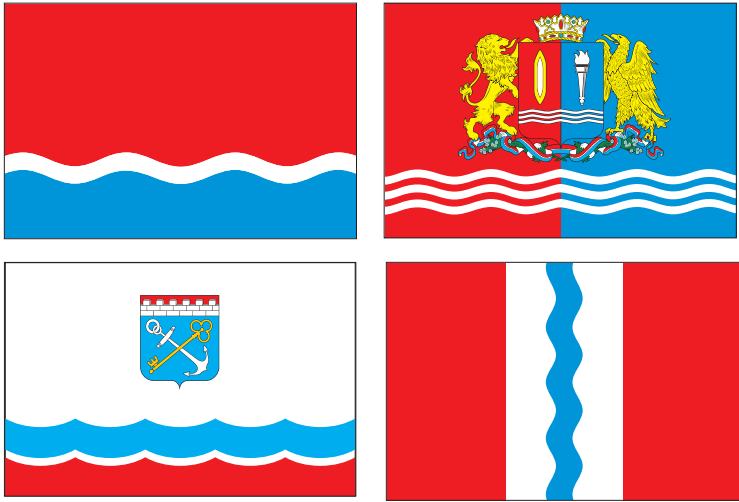
## Geographic Symbols

The diverse geography of Russia is represented on the flags of 12 federal subjects. Two flags include map-like representations of the territories. The flag of Sakhalin Oblast shows Sakhalin Island and the Kuril Islands against the background of the sea. On the flag of Stavropol Krai the arms show a map of the territory, including the line of the 45th parallel north and a white cross marking the location of the "City of the Cross".

Russia has many mountain ranges. One of the best known is the Caucasus—the dividing line between Europe and Asia. Two flags show the Caucasus Mountains: the flag of Kabardino-Balkaria shows Mount Elbrus, the highest mountain in Europe; Karachay-Cherkessia's flag shows a sunrise behind the same mountain. The flag of Voronezh Oblast also includes a mountain, but in a more stylized manner—it has a mountainside made of individual stones. Physical topography is also on the flag of Lipetsk, which shows five hills.



Figure 12: Mountains on the flags of (from top to bottom) Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Voronezh Oblast.



*Figure 13. Water on the flags of (clockwise, from top left) Amur Oblast, Ivanovo Oblast, Omsk Oblast, and Leningrad Oblast.*

Water, of course, is important in every country. While on many flags the color blue represents the concept of water or specific bodies of water, on a number of flags water is a central part of the symbolism in the design. Two of the flags include wavy lines as the central emblem on their flags. Amur Oblast's flag has a narrow wavy white stripe atop a wider blue stripe, representing the Amur River. In contrast, a single blue wavy line runs vertically through the flag of Omsk Oblast, representing the Irtysh River. The Volga River inspired the three silver (or white) wavy lines running horizontally across both the arms and flag of Ivanovo Oblast. In addition, three federal subjects use scalloped waves of water as stripes along the bases of their flags (reminiscent of the old Soviet republic flags of Latvia and Estonia)—Leningrad Oblast, Magadan Oblast, and Ulyanovsk Oblast. On the flag of Voronezh Oblast, a stream of water flows out of a pitcher on a mountain-side, symbolizing the Voronezh River.

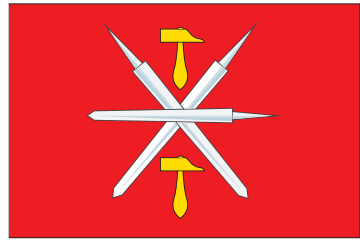
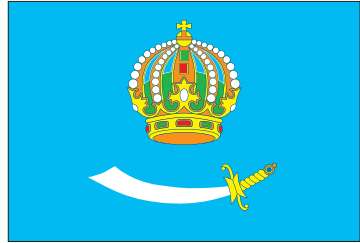
### **Weapons, Tools, and Books**

A variety of weapons are represented on a total of 14 flags. Adygea's flag has three arrows, while the flag of Kirov Oblast has a bow and arrow. Swords appear on six flags. The flag of Astrakhan Oblast bears a scimitar. The swords on the other five flags are being held by various figures on the flags. Tula Oblast's flag includes three sword blades, representing the region's role as a center of weapons manufacturing. Lances are on both flags that show St. George—those of Moscow Oblast and the city of Moscow. The bear on the flag of Yaroslavl Oblast holds a halberd, alluding to the legend about Yaroslav the Wise slaying a bear with his

polearm at the site of the city. A gun carriage is on the arms shown on Smolensk Oblast's flag. In addition a small mortar from the city arms of Bryansk appears in the arms of Bryansk Oblast and on that oblast's flag.

Tools appear on 11 flags. The most prevalent is the hammer, shown on five different flags. Sickles are on two of those flags, as well as on a third flag. Picks (such as those used in mining) are on two flags, in both cases in combination with hammers. There is also a shovel on one flag—again, combined with a hammer. Other symbols in this category include a shuttle, a torch, a candlestick, a key, a pitcher, and two different types of anchor.

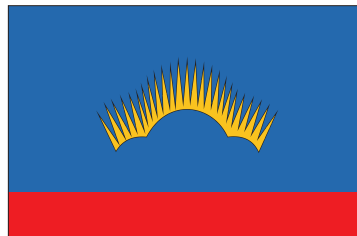
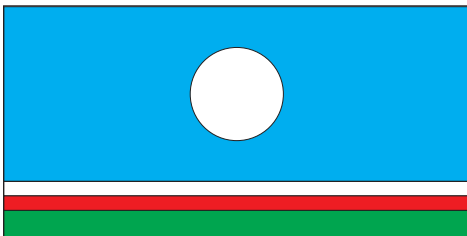
In addition, two flags include books as elements of the arms. The flag of Perm Krai depicts a Book of the Gospels, carried on the back of a bear. Oryol Oblast's arms include a secular book, representing the importance of literature.



*Figure 14: Weapons on the flags of (from top to bottom) Adygea, Astrakhan Oblast, and Tula Oblast.*

## Celestial and Atmospheric Objects

Ten flags of the federal subjects include celestial objects—stars, the moon, and the sun. Interestingly, as pervasive a symbol as the star was in Soviet symbolism, only two of the flags include stars and in both cases the usage predates the Russian Revolution. The Republic of Adygea is using a flag with twelve 5-pointed yellow stars which was used by an independence movement as early as the 1830s.



*Figure 15: The white sun on the flag of (left) Sakha (Yakutia) and the Aurora Borealis on the flag of Murmansk Oblast.*

Chuvashia's flag has three 8-pointed stars which have long been used in the culture of the region. Crescent moons appear on two flags—in the arms on the flag of Orenburg Oblast and as part of the *soyombo* symbol on the flag of Buryatia.

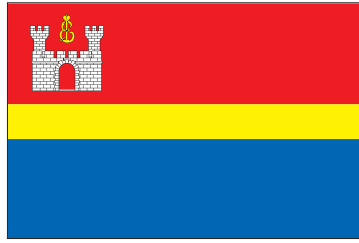
The sun appears on eight Russian subnational flags. A full solar disk is included in Buryatia's *soyombo*, as well as on the flag of Sakha (Yakutia). Karachay-Cherkessia's flag shows a sunrise behind the Caucasus Mountains. The other flags incorporate sun symbols (usually called "solar signs") used in the cultures of the different regions. Ingushetia's flag has a red solar sign that consists of a circle with three arms curving out from the circle. Khakassia's solar sign is more complex with a set of concentric circles and four triangular rays extending out from the perimeter. The flags of Mordovia and Udmurtia show the same basic symbol. On Udmurtia's flag it is shown as a single 8-pointed solar cross. In contrast, Mordovia's flag has this symbol split into four equal parts, shaped like an arrow's fletching and pointing inward. Mari El's flag also has a type of solar symbol, although it is usually referred to as a Mari El Cross. For a more detailed discussion of solar signs, see the section on cultural symbols.

Four flags depict atmospheric phenomena. Two (Kirov Oblast and Vologda Oblast) have clouds, both presumably representing heaven. The flag of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast has a rainbow—like the clouds, a religious symbol. Murmansk Oblast's flag has a natural phenomenon unique to the northern regions of the world—the *Aurora Borealis* or Northern Lights.

## Structures and Transportation

Various man-made structures are shown on flags of the federal subjects. Fortresses appear in the arms on the flags of Krasnodar Krai, Stavropol Krai, and Oryol Oblast. A fortress is also the major element on the flag of Kaliningrad Oblast. In addition, other types of structures are evident on various flags, mostly as elements of coats of arms—Altai Krai has a blast furnace on its arms, a wall is in the arms of Leningrad Oblast, Magadan Oblast's arms have a hydroelectric dam, and there is a column on the arms of Ulyanovsk Oblast. Another large structure is on the flag of Volgograd Oblast. This immense statue is 85 meters (279 feet) tall and weighs 7,900 tons. The monument was erected in Volgograd (then called Stalingrad) to recognize the city's "Hero City" status from the Battle of Stalingrad during World War II. Perhaps the most unique structures on any of the flags, however, are the burial mounds on the flag of Kurgan Oblast. The word for a burial mound of this type is *kurgan*, the source of the oblast's name.

Transportation symbols appear on eight subnational flags of Russia. Three of those flags have transport animals—two with saddled horses (Moscow Oblast and the city of Moscow) and a pack camel (on the flag of Chelyabinsk Oblast). Nautical transportation is represented on three flags. Kostroma Oblast has an imperial galleon, while the flags of Leningrad Oblast and the city of St. Petersburg both have anchors. Aviation is represented by the airplane on the arms and flag of Magadan Oblast. In addition, the Trans-Siberian Railway is symbolized by a thin black/white/black line below the arms on Novosibirsk Oblast's flag.



### Soviet Legacies

Obviously, the Soviet period has left a tremendous legacy on Russia, a legacy reflected on many flags of the federal subjects. Looking back on the history of the Soviet Union, one event appears to have had the most impact on the flags—the conflict which the Soviets called the Great Patriotic War. World War II had a tragic impact on the people and territories of the USSR and Soviet Russia. It is estimated that the Soviet Union suffered about 10.6 million military deaths and lost 14-17 million civilians as a result of the Nazi invasion. Even today, the war is a symbol of great patriotism and sacrifice for the homeland. As a result of their heroism during World War II, a number of regions received the Order of Lenin. The ribbon of this medal—red with two narrow yellow stripes at the edges—appears in the arms on five flags (Krasnodar Krai, Krasnoyarsk Krai, Bryansk Oblast, Kemerovo Oblast, and Tambov Oblast). It also influenced the field of the flag of Smolensk Oblast. Bryansk Oblast's arms also include a second ribbon—that of the Partisans of the Patriotic War. Another legacy from World War II is the sculpture on the flag of Volgograd Oblast. This statue is a monument to the Soviet victory in the Battle of Stalingrad (the name of the city at the time).

*Figure 16: Structures from the flags of (from top to bottom) Kaliningrad Oblast (a fortress), Altai Krai (a blast furnace), and Kurgan Oblast (burial mounds).*

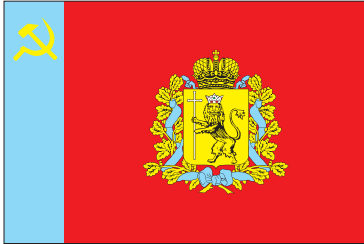


Figure 17. *The Soviet-inspired designs of (from top to bottom) Bryansk Oblast, Vladimir Oblast, and Altai Krai.*

Two flags have retained the hammer and sickle symbols prevalent on flags during the Soviet period. They are Bryansk Oblast and Vladimir Oblast. Other flags reflect the Soviet legacy through designs which look quite similar to the symbols used in Soviet arms and flags. For example, while the arms on Altai Krai's flag include symbols that predate the Soviet Union, the overall presentation of the arms and the shaft of grain near the hoist retain a certain Soviet style. The arms on the flag of Magadan Oblast also include symbols of progress of the type popular in the Soviet Union—an airplane and a hydroelectric dam.

There are also flags which at first glance might appear to use Soviet symbols, but are actually based on arms which predate the USSR. One is the flag of Tula Oblast with its array of blades and hammers. This arrangement is based upon the city arms of Tula which date to 1778. The sickle held by the lion on the arms of Krasnoyarsk Krai is pre-Soviet in origin, appearing in the city arms of Krasnoyarsk in 1851.<sup>17</sup>

## Cultural Symbols

The cultural diversity of the federal subjects is evident in the wide variety of cultural symbols on their flags. Many of the republics use distinctive symbols from the cultures of their people. The *kurai* flower on Bashkortostan's flag and the *soyombo* on that of Buryatia are important cultural symbols in those regions.

Various solar signs on the flags of Ingushetia, Khakassia, Mordovia, and Udmurtia are also cultural symbols. A similar symbol, sometimes called a solar sign but usually referred to as a Mari El cross, is on the flag of Mari El. Solar signs are commonly described not only as symbols of the sun, but also as representing

17. "Gerb goroda Tula", *Geral'dika.ru*, <http://geraldika.ru/symbols/1470>, accessed 27 August 2008; "Gerb goroda Krasnoyarsk (1851 g.)", *Geral'dika.ru*, <http://geraldika.ru/symbols/451>, accessed 27 August 2008.

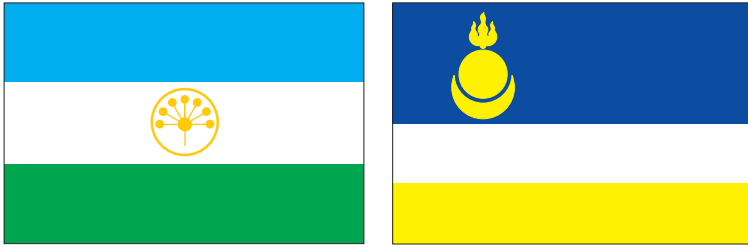


Figure 18. Cultural symbols on the flags of (left) Bashkortostan and Buryatia.

fire, fertility, and renewal of life. At one time, they were believed to have protective powers and were a common motif in clothing decorations. Another flag with distinctive cultural symbols is that of Chuvashia, which includes a stylized Tree of Life and three 8-pointed stars—all traditional symbols in the Chuvash culture. All of these patterns suggest motifs that might be found in embroidery or other cultural decorations of the regions. Chechnya's flag includes a repeating Chechen national ornament at the hoist, a pattern that could be drawn from embroidery or rug designs.<sup>18</sup>

Another symbol used in cultural decorations is on the flag of Tyumen Oblast, as well as on the flags of three autonomous okrugs. On the oblast's flag are three stylized crowns described as traditional ornaments of the people. They appear to be made of reindeer antlers. This same symbol is the principal emblem on the flag of Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, which is part of the territory of Tyumen Oblast. On the flags of Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (also territorially part of Tyumen Oblast) and Nenets Autonomous Okrug the emblem is repeated across the length of the flags and more closely resembles the patterns on traditional clothing.<sup>19</sup>

18. "Embroidery", in Pronin and Pronin, *Russian Folk Arts*, p. 142-158; Nina T. Klimova, *Folk Embroidery of the USSR* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981), p. 13-15; Muzei narodnogo iskusstva, *Izobrazitel'nye motivy v russkoi narodnoi vyshivke* (Moskva: Sovetskaiia Rossiia, 1990); Finno-ugorskii kul'turnyi tsentr Rossiiskoi Federatsii, "Mariitsy: Ornament", *Informatsionnyi tsentr "Finnougoriia"*, [http://www.finnougoria.ru/community/folk/12/detail.php?IBLOCK\\_ID=46&SECTION\\_ID=350&ELEMENT\\_ID=2337](http://www.finnougoria.ru/community/folk/12/detail.php?IBLOCK_ID=46&SECTION_ID=350&ELEMENT_ID=2337), accessed 30 July 2008; Mari El cross embroidery image is based upon an image found on the website of the Finno-ugorskii kul'turnyi tsentr Rossiiskoi Federatsii, <http://www.finnougoria.ru/upload/iblock/68f/smgizplb.gif>, accessed 30 July 2008.

19. Finno-ugorskii kul'turnyi tsentr Rossiiskoi Federatsii, "Nenetsy: Dekorativnoe tvorchestvo", *Informatsionnyi tsentr "Finnougoriia"*, [http://www.finnougoria.ru/community/folk/15/detail.php?IBLOCK\\_ID=46&SECTION\\_ID=353&ELEMENT\\_ID=2398](http://www.finnougoria.ru/community/folk/15/detail.php?IBLOCK_ID=46&SECTION_ID=353&ELEMENT_ID=2398), accessed 30 July 2008; Finno-ugorskii kul'turnyi tsentr Rossiiskoi Federatsii, "Komi-Permiaki: Ornament", *Informatsionnyi tsentr "Finnougoriia"*, [http://www.finnougoria.ru/community/folk/9/detail.php?IBLOCK\\_ID=46&SECTION\\_ID=347&ELEMENT\\_ID=2277](http://www.finnougoria.ru/community/folk/9/detail.php?IBLOCK_ID=46&SECTION_ID=347&ELEMENT_ID=2277), accessed 30 July 2008.



Figure 19. The Tree of Life symbol on Chuvashia’s flag, the Chechen national ornament on Chechnya’s flag, and a variety of solar signs on the flags of Mordovia, Udmurtia, Mari El, Ingushetia, and Khakassia.



Figure 20. Variation of the Mari El Cross as an embroidery motif.

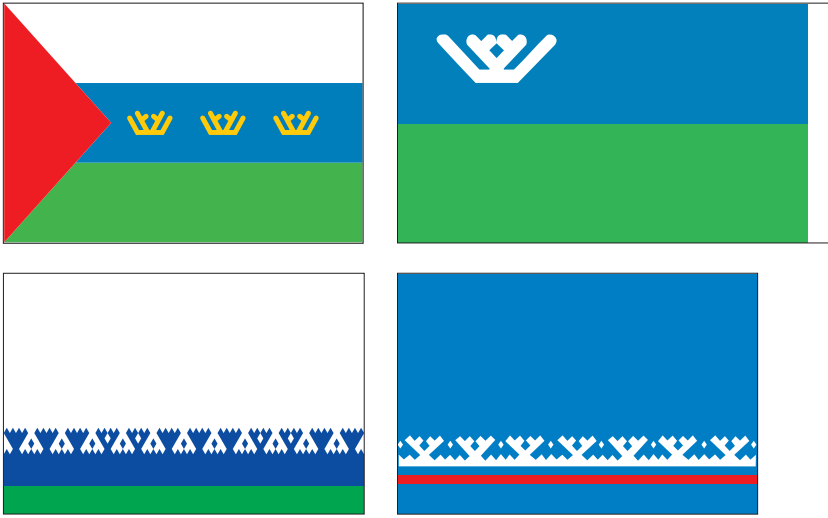


Figure 21. The crowns and reindeer antler ornaments of (clockwise, from top left) Tyumen Oblast, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, and Nenets Autonomous Okrug.

## Summary

Currently 81 federal subjects of Russia—all but two—have their own flags. The designs are colorful and distinctive. Striped designs (72%) outnumber the flags with solid fields (22%). However, only a small number of flags rely solely upon stripes for their symbolism. The majority of designs are more complex and unique. Each flag represents a different region, uses different colors, and incorporates different symbols. While many flags have similar designs, no one pattern dominates. As a result, the flags of the federal subjects are a colorful collection of unique symbols. One clear trend is the heraldic nature of the flags—81% of the flags are based in some way upon the regional coats of arms.

Russian sources are usually careful to stress that the Russian Federation *consists of* 83 federal subjects, rather than to say that it is *divided into* 83 federal subjects. The phraseology may seem like semantics, but it is an important distinction for the Russians. Each federal subject is considered an integral, indivisible part of the Russian Federation. In the designs of their flags and the symbolism assigned to them, the majority of the federal subjects stress their role as a part of the greater whole. They do so through the use of the national colors and through the use of symbols which demonstrate their unity with Russia. In addition, most federal subjects have adopted the official 2:3 proportions of the national flag. It seems that the lessons of Russian history have taught that the whole is stronger than any individual territory.

While modern Russia still faces many challenges, it seems to be coming to terms with its diversity and with its past. Across the flags of the federal subjects one can find the symbols of a range of peoples, each with their own unique culture. Four major world religions are symbolized in flags of the federal subjects. It is interesting to see the wide variety of cultural symbols drawn from the traditions of the many peoples who live in the country.

The story of Russian history is told in many of the flags—the time of the tsars and the Russian Empire, the period of the Soviet Union, the trauma of invasion and the glory of victory, and the contrast of ancient traditions and industrial development. A consistent theme across the designs is the willingness of the people to defend their homeland.

It is also interesting to see how the flag designs illustrate the geographic diversity and the immense size of the Russian Federation. The shores of the Baltic Sea and the Pacific coast, the mountains of the Caucasus, the sunny regions in the south, the snowy regions of the north, and the vastness of Siberia—all are represented on the flags. A number of the flags depict water in their designs, and even more assign water-related symbolism to the color blue in their flags. All of the major rivers of the Russian Federation, and the coastlines with a variety of seas and oceans, are represented. A wide variety of wildlife appears on the flags, including eagles, partridges, fish, bees, camels, bears, martens, sables, and Siberian tigers—all demonstrating the diverse fauna of the country.

As a result of the wide variety of designs and the broad range of symbolism used, a study of the flag designs of the federal subjects tells a great deal about the regions of Russia, and about the Russian Federation as a whole, and each flag has a story to tell.

