

Mennonites and Germans in Russia Today: A Study of Ethno-Sociological Polls

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There is a tradition in Russia of combining Mennonites and Germans into one group. This tradition began when Mennonites and Germans immigrated to the Russian Empire and was based on the attitude of the state toward the settlers as an estate of colonists. After estates had been abolished, all further laws concerning Germans were also applied to Mennonites. So for example, Mennonites continually had to defend their rights which were based on religious convictions, such as pacifism when universal military service was introduced. Before the 1917 Revolution, Mennonites managed to negotiate exemption from military service to some extent, but the Soviet government, proclaiming a struggle against religion as one of its main purposes, did not allow any concessions to believers. In the first national Soviet census taken in 1926, almost all Mennonites were enumerated as Germans. A number of external factors played a role in the state combining Mennonites and Germans in one category. These included: the similarity between *Plattdeutsch* and the German dialects of other Russian Germans; their shared Protestant faith; and the fact that immigrants to Russia came from proximate places in Western Europe. In Russia all immigrants

from Europe were generally called “Germans.” This included not only Mennonites but Austrians, Swiss, Dutch Lutherans (the so-called “Hollanders”) and other settlers from Europe were also entered in the census as “Germans.” Such generalizations are typical not only of Russia; in Europe and America all immigrants from Russia are called “Russians” although they may be people of different ethnic backgrounds, such as Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Tatars, etc.

Combining Mennonites and Germans into one “nationality,” as the Soviet Union did, had its negative and tragic consequences. Mennonites shared the tragic fate of the German nation. They were repressed and deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan, they were subject to the regime of “special settlements” and were pressured to abandon their language and be culturally assimilated. On the other hand, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union during great economic and social crisis, Mennonites were able to use a German repatriation program and together with other Germans immigrate in large numbers to Germany. This resulted in a sharp reduction in the number of Mennonites in countries of the former USSR. At present it is impossible to estimate how many Mennonites currently live in Russia because Mennonites are still entered in censuses as Germans.

In conducting ethnographic research in Siberian Mennonite villages, we recorded specific features of Mennonite traditional culture, especially those that concerned occupation, cultural practices, and conventions of behavior in the family and community.¹ But the present situation of Mennonites and the linguistic and cultural practices among them are apparently no different from other Russian Germans. It was not only state policy that contributed to the inclusion of Mennonites with Russian Germans. It was also their co-habitation with Germans and Russians, their use of the Russian language, and the large scale religious affiliation of Mennonites with Baptist churches, or in some cases in cities with Orthodoxy, or an abandonment of religion altogether. We conclude that the present language, culture and identity of Mennonites is exactly the same as that of Russian Germans. Therefore we consider it possible to present results of an ethno-sociological survey that was conducted in the entire territory of the Russian Federation in 2009 as applicable to Mennonites.

As a rule, three main types of sources are used for the study of the present situation of an ethnic entity (or present ethnic currents). First, statistical data allows us to define quantitative characteristics of a target group and identify its main parameters. Second, the results of ethno-sociological polls significantly expand and supplement the information that we receive from the statistical sources. And finally, qualitative sources, mainly interviews, allow us to answer many questions by way of direct communication with people.

Ethno-sociological polls are the most important component of the research. These projects are rather complex in implementation; in order to obtain reliable data, various steps need to be taken, starting with the development of a detailed research program. Then it is necessary to determine a representative selection for the interpretation of findings and the elaboration of recommendations for the authorities and various organizations and institutions. Therefore comparatively few ethno-sociological polls have been conducted among Russian Germans.

In a previous period, polls were conducted in Siberia by Lev Viktorovich Malinovskii, Elvira Rudol'fovka Barbashina and staff of our research laboratory. These included large-scale polls conducted in 1989 and 1999. In order to monitor the dynamics in the development of an ethnic community, it is necessary to conduct polls at least once every ten years. Therefore a joint Russian-German project was carried out in 2009 entitled, "Organizing and implementing ethno-sociological polls of the country's German population and monitoring a network of ethno-cultural centers of Russian Germans."

The need for this project was determined by many circumstances, but mainly by the fact that the ethnic community of Russian Germans has undergone a tremendous transformation. The greatest change was brought about by their emigration to Germany. This resulted in a sharp decrease of 30% in the German population in Russia, an increase in the number of people of mixed origins among them, a decrease of knowledge of and use of German and a more widely dispersed residence. According to the 1989 census, there were more than one hundred rural settlements where Germans made up a pronounced majority (more than 80%). According to the 2000 census, such settlements no longer existed and the composition of these settlements had been changed by 80-90%. At the time when German national *raions* (or districts) were organized, Germans made up 60-80% of the population, but according to the 2002 census they made up only 30%. There was an increase in the percentage of German urban population and a growth of ethnic self-consciousness among Germans. New forms of self-organizations appeared and contacts with Germany became more active. All these changes made it necessary to carry out a mass survey among the German population.

The poll was conducted in 2009 in all seven federal *okrugs* proportionate to the number of Germans living in these *okrugs*. For example, 52% of the Germans in Russia reside in the Siberian *okrug*, 5.5% in the Central *okrug*, 12% in the Volga *okrug* and only 2% in the Far Eastern *okrug*. A corresponding selection was done in the other *okrugs*. The survey was conducted in 168 settlements from Kaliningrad, Moscow and St. Petersburg to small settlements of the Far East.

Altogether 1,500 people took part in the poll. The selection was stratified, that is, it corresponded to the structure of the German population of Russia by gender, six age groups and the ratio of rural to urban population. For developing the polling program, preparation of the questionnaires and conducting the survey in the federal *okrugs*, a team of ten experts was set up including four doctors of science and another four candidates of science. All of them were members of the International Association of Researchers of History and Culture of Russian Germans. The results were centrally processed in Moscow using SPSS software [computer software for social sciences statistical analysis].

The survey instrument consisted of seventy five questions which were grouped together under ethnic identity, language, culture, migration situation, programs for the support of Russian Germans, public organization, demands and needs in the ethno-cultural sphere. The results of the poll were as follows.

Only people who clearly identified themselves as German took part in the survey. Among people who identify themselves as Germans there are many persons of mixed origin (from 50 to 70% in different regions) who have multiple or ambiguous identities; we polled only those who defined their ethnic identity as "German."

It should be noted that in everyday life people of mixed origin seldom have to choose this or that ethnic identity. They consider themselves half Russian and half German, or half Ukrainian and half German, etc. Ethnographers consider it a positive fact that people of mixed origin possess a cultural pool of several national identities as their heritage is richer and more diverse. And it is completely unnecessary to make a choice in favor of this or that nationality. However, sometimes circumstances arise when one needs to make a choice, for example, when completing migration documents or during censuses or polls. Situations arise when people with mixed identity have to choose in favor of one or another ethnic identity. We asked respondents the reason for their choice. The answers were obvious, they had German roots and a cultural similarity to German culture. Not many (2%) said that their motive was a desire to leave for Germany.

The majority of respondents were in mixed marriages, 65% of all those married. Most mixed marriages, 85% of the total, were to Russians, while 15% were to people of practically every ethnic identity in our country.

There were questions about the importance of German identity for Germans. Other questions were dedicated to ethnic symbols and landmarks, the image Russian Germans have of their own people, knowledge of their history, and the opinion about the past and the future of their nation (or people).

In answering the question as to what unites Russian Germans, the overwhelming majority (70%) responded that they shared a common historical fate, 55% said that it was common culture and 45% identified the German language as a unifying factor. One question asked whether Germans in Russia were an independent nation or not. In this case, opposite opinions were represented approximately equally. There were also questions about the role of the family in identity formation, the age at which an identity is formed and how people perceive or interpret their ethnic identities.

The majority of respondents (53%) were proud of their German identity. Negative opinions were not numerous but they were present. For 4% of the respondents, a national identity caused a feeling of uncertainty and for 6%, a feeling of resentment. A significant group of respondents (31%) had no special feelings regarding their nationality.

This data is indicative of the formation of normal and positive ethnic identity. It would be incorrect to state that there was no feeling of status infringement among Germans. Answering the question "Have you ever experienced an unfriendly attitude toward yourself based on national grounds?" approximately half of respondents said "yes," but nearly everyone said that it had happened during their childhood, and the people who answered this way were mainly elderly people. Germans (especially older and middle aged) considered it a significant injustice that they had not been allowed to fight on the war front and had been labeled traitors. However, for them that was in the past and at present an overwhelming majority did not experience any discomfort because of their ethnicity.

They were also asked: "Do you know the history of Russian Germans?" The most frequent response (45%) was "I know a little bit." Many said that there was a shortage of books on the history of Russian Germans written in intelligible and popular formats and designed for different age groups as well as books on the history of Germans in various Russian regions. Of great interest were publications of a biographical nature and stories about prominent Germans who made a significant contribution to the history of the Russian state.

When asked what was the most important date for them, the deportation still remains a key moment in the history of Russian Germans according to the respondents (67%). The second most significant event was the Manifesto of Catherine II and her invitation to Germans to migrate to Russia (26%). Among other important dates given by respondents was the organization of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Volga Germans, the decrees of partial rehabilitation (1955-72) and the subsequent movement for the restoration of the Republic (1988-92). The deportation and the Republic were the most important where the history of the nation was concerned. When asked, "What is

your opinion regarding the restoration of the Volga German Republic?" 63.7% were positive, 27.3% were indifferent and 9.0% were negative.

At the same time, the majority indicated that they would not move if the Republic was restored. When asked if they would move, 40% of the respondents gave a resolute "no." About the same number would move if special conditions could be created and 22% would move in any case. The majority said that the Republic should be re-established in order to right an historical injustice. Many respondents had an idealistic notion of the Republic and thought that everything was wonderful and beautiful there.

Naturally the form included a block of questions concerning language. It should be noted that the preservation of German and the development of different ways of teaching is a task of prime importance. At present 60% of Germans consider Russian to be their mother tongue and think the educational system should take this fact into consideration. The percentage of Germans who speak no German at all is increasing (8-9%); the percentage of people who speak German fluently is also increasing (31.2% according to our poll and 31.6% according to the 2002 census). This tendency is definitely connected to the implementation of German instruction in the 1990s and 2000s through different forms (schools and language courses). It is also important that the language competence of the young generation is higher than that of the middle one. The middle generation reveals weak German language proficiency. The older generation learned German through family communication in childhood, but the language competence of the youth is acquired mainly through education. The importance of school is to be emphasized since over half of those people who know German studied it in secondary school. At present German is rapidly disappearing from schools and universities and soon there will be no students or teachers. The small number of German language groups in universities in comparison with English ones is striking. At the same time, awareness of the need to teach German is growing; 93% of respondents answered affirmatively to the question "Do you think that children of Russian Germans should be taught German in school?"

Historical conditions of German language development in Russia resulted in a recent strengthening of literary German. Answering the question in what form they knew German, whether dialect or literary, 43.6% of the people who were competent in German said that they knew it in the form of a literary language, 37.3% knew it as a dialect and 19.1% knew it as both a dialect and as a literary language.

Out of the 1,500 people surveyed, 290 said that they knew a dialect well. Ninety eight people knew *Plattdeutsch*. Slightly fewer, ninety two people, knew Swabian. The number of people who knew other dialects – Hessian, Bavarian, Austrian, etc. – was considerably less. (Some people

could not identify dialect names. “We speak as our parents spoke, but do not know the dialect name.”) *Plattdeutsch* was the best preserved dialect among Russian German dialects according to the data. There are several factors that have ensured that *Plattdeutsch* has been preserved until the present time: it is significantly different from both a literary German and other dialects; Mennonites remained isolated from other groups for a long time; the existence of confessional barriers between Mennonites and other groups; the Mennonite penchant to marry within the group contributed to the preservation of this dialect in the family. These factors applied especially to Siberian settlements in which Mennonites still have a numerical majority. In our opinion, these barriers finally disintegrated in the 1980s, not that long ago by historical standards.

Several questions were dedicated to the state of the national culture. These were questions about national holidays, cuisine and religious life. The replies were not surprising except for the data that Christian Orthodox Germans were the second largest group (29%), yielding to Lutherans (32%) and significantly surpassing Catholics (12%). Out of 1,500 people, only fourteen said that they were of Mennonite faith.

On the whole, the development of ethnic culture should not be considered that catastrophic compared to the language situation, but still far from ideal. In order to secure a steady development, continuous work is required. The most optimal option for its current development seems to be the modernization of Russian German culture through a cultural exchange with Germany while preserving the most important elements and symbols of ethnic culture and German Russian cultural heritage.

A block of questions was dedicated to the recent emigration. Although the number of people desiring to leave for permanent residence in Germany had significantly decreased, it still remained rather high. According to the poll, 19% of respondents would like to leave for Germany, 26% do not rule out this possibility, 44% do not want to change their place of residence and 11% were undecided. Some tendencies are observable. First, emigration sentiments were expressed more by young people, which can be explained by the lack of social guarantees for youth and their higher mobility. Second, as compared to previous regional polls conducted in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, the percentage of those who did not want to emigrate had not changed significantly, but the percentage of undecided had significantly increased.

The main causes of emigration remained the same as ten, fifteen and twenty years ago. The primary cause identified was economic: a low standard of living, a desire to secure the future for children, the lack of stability in Russia, the lack of housing and unemployment. The second reason for emigration was family reunion; 20% identified this

as a reason. Many would also like to continue their education abroad. Nearly 10% of respondents said that a possible reason for emigration may become the lack of conditions in Russia for the preservation of the national culture.

The poll asked not only for the reasons of emigration but also why people wanted to stay: 24.3% said, "my family lives here"; 20.5%, "I was born here, it is my motherland"; 14.9%, "I feel good here"; 32% cited reasons of a personal nature such as high social status, interesting work, German language incompetence, reluctance to be "second rate people" in Germany, unwillingness of close relatives to emigrate, "I have already been there and came back," "I visited Germany and did not like it there, so why should I want to emigrate?" When asked "What do you consider your motherland?" 73% said Russia and 4% said Germany.

In spite of a decrease in emigration rates, its large scale nature caused a number of economic, social and national problems. According to the Federal Migration Service of Russia, almost half of those who left for Germany in recent years have returned. Many respondents indicated that insufficient measures had been taken to implement the Russian law for support of compatriots abroad and the "State Program" (for assistance to return). Many of those who emigrated interpreted this "Program" as a repatriation one though it is not. It includes quite strict criteria for those who would like to return and a considerable percentage of petitions have been declined. As of 1 October 2009, 93,500 people have applied to the Federal Migration Service of Russia abroad regarding the State Program for assistance to return. Only 21,000 applications have been accepted, 23% of those that applied. It is almost three times less than was expected by the "Program" developers. The highest percentage of denials was for return from Kazakhstan and the highest number of petitions came from Israel and Germany. When most petitioners learn about actual living conditions, they abandon their aspirations to return. This Program could certainly be improved. In comparison, in 2009 Kazakhstan accepted the return of 100,000 of its compatriots. During the 1990s, Germany received 200,000 Germans, but under the Russian State Program passed in 2006, only 15,000 people together with family members were resettled.

In recent years, self-organization has had a significant influence on the development of the Russian German ethnic community. A high degree of self-organization is characteristic of Germans. Public organizations of Russian Germans were established in all areas of the Russian Federation and included German cultural centres ("Meeting Centers"), national-cultural autonomous *raions*, branches of the *Wiedergeburt* Society, youth associations, Russian-German Houses, various foundations and societies.

In connection with the need to evaluate the role of these organizations in the life of Russian Germans, a number of questions concerned their activity. According to the results of the poll, 42.5% of respondents took part in public organizations (whether in organizational leadership roles or simply as participants in some events). Of these, 16% took an active part in the work of these organizations. This is positive for Russian society for there is a correlation between what the citizens do for themselves and the development of a civil society. Russia should follow the example of Germans because Germany is a nation of civic organizations.

One of the key foci of the survey was German ethno-cultural development and the demands and interests of Germans in this area. We asked, "What is required for the preservation of German national identity?" The most prevalent response had to do with the very alarming, if not catastrophic, state of German in terms of knowledge of it, the teaching of it and the future of it in Russia. Language instruction requires urgent and well planned attention.

The second most frequent answer concerned populations clusters of Germans (37%).

The third most significant answer concerned the further development of public organizations. Much has been done in this regard through financial and administrative assistance to them. The Eighth Forum of Russian Germans which took place in January 2010 in Moscow emphasized that more work still needs to be done.

The fourth most significant answer concerned literature on the culture and history of Russian Germans. In recent years, a significant amount of such literature has been published. Among these books are world class studies which include rich historical and cultural materials and cutting edge research. Other works are pseudo-scientific, incompetent and do not stand up to criticism. Therefore it is necessary to improve the system of reviewing publications and the quality of projects to be published. For many people, the aspiration to study the history of their nation is closely connected with an interest in their family histories. 76.9% of respondents indicated an interest in family history, 17.3% were not especially interested and 5.8% were not at all interested. There is a need for a database of family names and genealogical records. Respondents were interested in family histories due to the fact that during numerous migrations, deportation and emigration to different countries many people lost track of their relatives. Ties were broken and the majority of Germans would like to restore them and re-establish contacts with relatives.

Following the above four priorities in ethno-cultural development for respondents, they also identified, in descending order of importance: the need to hold festivals, national holidays, the restoration of

the Republic, the creation of German broadcasting, the establishment and support of national schools and higher educational institutions, the development of a national German press, the support of folk groups, the development of national museums and theatres. These opinions should be taken into consideration when elaborating programs for the support of the German minority in Russia, implementing competitions and planning of specific actions.

In general people's response to the survey was positive and demonstrated an interest in and a desire to discuss the poll questions. Many respondents indicated the timeliness of the survey and thought these issues should have been addressed some time ago. Full reports of this survey were published by the International Union of German Culture in Moscow.

The continued development of an ethnic culture requires ongoing work. At the present time the optimal way for the development of the Russian German culture seems to be modernization of the culture through expanded cultural exchange with Germany while preserving the most important elements and symbols of the ethnic culture of Mennonites and Germans of Russia.

Translated by Olga Shmakina

Notes

- ¹ Materials of ethnographic expeditions for all the years of the research have been deposited with the Museum of Archeology and Ethnography of F. M. Dostoevsky Omsk State University. Results of ethnographic expeditions of 1996-1997 to Altai, where Mennonites made up about 80% of all Germans, are presented on the web site "Germans in Altai: ethnic history and culture." http://newasp.omskreg.ru/alt_nem/.