

Ethno-social Records of Siberian Estonians in the Record Center of Modern History of the Omsk Region

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It was in 1918 already when the communist organizations of foreign workers were set up at the Central Committee of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of Russia and local party committees. These were propagandizing and campaigning the communists of different nationalities and the population.

The decree of the Omsk province committee of the Communist Party of December 31, 1920 established the branch of minorities (the later subdivision of the department of agitation and propaganda). It included the Tatar-Kirghiz, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, German, Polish, Jewish, Finnish and Chinese-Korean sections. These are the campaigns of these sections that are recorded in the documents of the Record Center of Modern History of the Omsk Region.

The sections did not have independent organizational functions. Therefore all the party members of different nationalities, although registered in their respective section, were members of the Russian Communist (Bolshevik) Party and subject to the general party discipline.

The establishment or liquidation of a section was decided by the corresponding party committee.

The task of the sections was to upgrade the communist consciousness of the party members of a particular nationality to the required level, leading and supporting the departments of popular education working at the executive committees. Popular education was the means for the sections headed by the department of agitation and propaganda and the subdivisions of minorities to organize training courses, political education, and club activities. They could also issue newspapers, leaflets and brochures in the native languages.

The sections had agitators and instructors to conduct campaigns and control and direct the local work. They also worked out programs, instructions and regulations. To discuss the problems related to the activities of the section there were convened counsels and conferences while all the decisions passed in the sections came into effect only after these had been confirmed by the minority subdivisions, the department of agitation and propaganda and the respective party committee.

The work in the section was directed by a bureau, responsible for all the work, elected at the conference and confirmed by the party committee. The sections did not have seals of their own and they used that of the corresponding party committee (Record Center, fond 1, list 2, file 472, p 159).

The work of the subdivision and the sections has been recorded in the preserved work schedules, reports and correspondence. So, the 1922 report of the Estonian section informs us that it had 4 staff members, and it organized a plenary session, the county party conference, 10 meetings, and 21 cell meetings. Much attention was paid to education: 146 children of the 420 of the school-going age were attending schools, there were not enough Estonian teachers, not enough rooms, while some of the rooms did not suit their function, etc (Record Center, fond 1, list 3, file 397, pp 2, 3).

The early 1920s in Siberia were marked by the campaign of repatriation. Various sources sent information about related increase in national activities. The commission agents made use of the difficulties and unemployment caused by ruin and famine, parasitizing on the natural human will to return homeland. There have been cases where the agents presented themselves as communists calling for the working people to go homeland to overthrow the bourgeois power; they were also spying.

The agents of the repatriation commissions got considerable help from the representatives of the Baltic city and village intellectuals. They felt themselves to be superfluous in the Russian economic chaos and besides planning to return homeland themselves, they persuaded also others.

So the report of the communist party cell of the Bolshoi Selim village of the Yegorovsk parish of the Taara county in the Omsk province says: "As the agents of white Estonia started to mislead the village people and the epidemic of repatriation to Estonia broke out, the local teacher Erdman was the first to meet the agents and obtain them papers agitating at the same time that nothing comes from life in the Soviet territory for people are robbed of everything and these are the communists that rob everybody. As a member of the cell, Comrade Lammas, warned him to come to his senses and not boost people to begging, the answer was short: "Who can stop me from doing what I want."

It is interesting that prior to that Erdman had been the secretary of the very same cell but he probably sensed the changed political climate, stepped out of the party and "took with him many good young comrades convincing them that the party work is a stupid idea of the madmen" (Record Center, fond 1, list 2, file 472, p 55).

In the period of restoration and the new economic policy the correspondence of the Estonian section of the all-Union Communist (Bolshevik) Party reflects the processes of overcoming the economic and cultural backlog of Estonian communities. So the report from November 1925 on the examination of the Estonian colonies and the party and the young communist league cells of the Krutinsk district of the Omsk region says: "Although the stay in Siberia has been long, people often turn to robbing, begging and hooliganism. Not a year in Ryzhkovo passes without a murder. The population is conservative and all they are bootleggers. There can be no more than 3-4 farmers that do not distil vodka and do not drink themselves. Women and children are as good at that as men.

The population is made up of the poor and middling farmers; there are no rich people in the true sense of the word. The cultural level is quite meagre, 75% of the population is illiterate in both Russian and Estonian.

The people, in their way of life or culture, have nothing in common with Estonians, they have their own peculiar ways that resembles rather the Russian ones (buildings, housekeeping, life-style)" (Record Center, fond 7, list 2, file 333, pp 22).

The situation was totally different in the Estonian villages of the same district settled by volunteers during the Stolypin agrarian reform. Although the deficiency of land hindered the rapid economic development, the situation of the Estonian population improved during the restoration period reaching the pre-war level. The improvement of economy (in the villages of Vyssokovskoye and Filinovskoye) can be illustrated by the following figures:

	year	arable land	horses	cows	threshing machines	mowing machines	horse rakes
Vyssokovskoye	1925	52 d.	45	114	3	14	14
	1926	67 d.	49	117	3	15	15
Filinovskoye	1925	176,5 d.	89	178	7	11	11
	1926	198,5 d.	98	193	8	12	12

Estonian households in these villages were more prosperous than the Russian ones. So, the 12 mowing machines and 5 horse rakes in the Filinovka village were possessed by eight Estonian families while only 7 of the 34 Russian ones had them; 39 of the 193 cows were in the 8 Estonians farms, and the 34 Russian farms had 154 cows.

The households were stratifying as to their class and social status. The number of peasants without a horse or home decreased, poorer households became stronger; a part of them could be classified as middling ones (Record Center, fond 7, list 3, file 373, p 29).

By the end of 1920s the Estonian settlers had achieved considerable results in both economic and cultural restoration. Assessing the economic conditions of the minorities the Department of Nations of the Russian Central Executive Committee divided the ethnic nationalities into three groups. The first one included Estonians, Latvians, Polish and some other peoples, the second was the Tatar, Kirghiz, Kazakh and the Kalmyk group, the third one were Mordvinian, Tshuvash, Udmurt and a few Siberian peoples. The first group was characterized by strong economic traditions evolved in the course of work. In 1928, the all-Union meeting of work commissioners of the minorities assessed the group as an exemplary one (Maamägi 1990: 99–100).

Attention was paid to the cultural work with the settlers. So the meeting of the Estonian educationalists of the Sedelnikovo and Yekaterinino districts of the Taara county of the Siberian territory held on April 3, 1927 in Lillikyla of the Sedelnikovo district, decided: “In order to establish cultural union between the Estonian colonies of the county there have to be organized joint folk festivals, free of charge, with various theatrical productions, collective games and other reasonable amusements, exhibiting there the handicraft and the notice boards of the Estonian vocational schools” (Record Center, fond 940, list 2, file 112, p 136).

To sum up, it can be said that the records of the Estonian party section in the Center of Modern History of the Omsk Region are a valuable source of the ethnic and social history of Siberian Estonians.

References:

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Translated by Anne Lange