

THE PAST IS A LOST COUNTRY: FAMILY NARRATIVES AMONG ETHNIC RUSSIANS IN LATVIA

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and its declaration of independence in 1991, Latvia has gone through a period of transition in which life-conditions have altered drastically. Collapse, chaos, massive restructuring and a host of dislocating mechanisms have affected the life of the majority of the population. These dislocations are particularly drastic for the ethnic Russian minority. This paper focuses on how the ethnic Russians attempt to construct their past within the context of the newly established Latvian state. The data derive from five-months fieldwork among ethnic Russian in Riga in 1995.

The Official Version of History

A central element in the transition from Soviet republic to independent statehood is the widespread perception that the independent Latvian Republic has been restored rather than simply created as a new state (Opalski et al. 1994:2). In official accounts, the history of Latvia was "frozen" with the Soviet annexation of 1940, and it did not thaw until the declaration of independence 51 years later. Latvia's first period of independence--between the two world wars--has been institutionalized as the history of Latvia.

Symbols of Soviet power, such as public monuments, have been dismantled; streets in the cities of Latvia have again received the names they had in the Interwar period; the Russian language has been banned from the public realm. The restoration of the Latvian Republic also involves reappropriation of property. Latvians have again regained property which belonged to them or their families in the Interwar period.

Nevertheless, the decree on the "Restoration of Latvian Citizenry and Basic Principles of Naturalization," adopted in October 1991, has been fundamental in the creation of the newly independent state and its history. According to this decree, all immigration in the Soviet period is considered illegal. People who settled in Latvia after 1940 and their descendants are defined as "illegal immigrants" representing an occupation power. Hence, the principle of exclusion and inclusion is based on "blood". Citizenship is gained if one can prove a consanguineous relation to persons of the first Latvian republic.

This situation leaves a group of 700,000 stateless persons out of a total population of 2.56 million (Vebers 1994:3).

The vast majority of non-citizens are ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking Slavs. Being a non-citizen entails not only a total lack of political rights; social and economical rights are also affected; "over 60 laws, decrees and other normative acts have been imposed upon non-citizens resulting in an array of restrictions of the social, economic, property and employment rights" (Tsilevich 1995:47). As a result of these restrictions, the Russians have been transformed from an ethnic minority into a socially disadvantaged group.

The Centrality of the Family's Biography

It would be misleading to speak of a coherent Russian community in Latvia. Apart from a few small cultural associations, Russian civil society is poorly developed. The Russians' low level of socio-political organization means that they lack the kind of collective action which might challenge or alter the exclusion of ethnic Russians from the creation of Latvian history. Lacking collective strategies, it is up to the individual to confront the official construction of history.

The modern form of history-making is constructed in connection with notions concerning people-nation-state (Chatterjee 1994:2). Furthermore, the construction of a historical unity or a historical subject is a process of exclusion and inclusion (Samuel & Thompson 1990:18). In this light, the creation of "official" history evolves together with relations of power "to subordinate other competing interpretations, other objectives, other main characters" (Knudsen 1989:12). In Latvia, such power relations are weighted in favor of a Latvian nationalist interpretation.

While Latvians construct their narratives as a Volk, the main principle of organization among ethnic Russians is the nuclear family. Although many ethnic Russians may have relatives in other parts of the former Soviet Union, maintaining contact with them is difficult because of travel expenses and visa requirements. The relative isolation of Russians as a minority within an independent Latvian state has certainly reinforced the importance of and dependence on the nuclear family.

In this context, the biography of the family becomes central. Genealogy has been in fashion among Westerners in recent years, but among Latvia's ethnic Russians the

knowledge of ancestors is integral to the formation and redefinition of identity. Precise accounts of when and where parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were born, their occupations, how they prospered and in many cases--how they were affected by the Russian Revolution and the Second World War-- are eagerly provided. The original connection of the informant's family to Latvia is often stressed, with informants recounting the story of the family-member who first came to Latvia. These primordial accounts often conflict with subsequent realities: interviewees often reveal how other relatives or the other line of the family arrived in Latvia generations later or that there has been a discontinuity of the family's residence in Latvia.

The biography of the family frequently contains some kind of legitimization for their presence in Latvia. This legitimization is constructed around two main themes. One theme is the victimization of ethnic Russians: we who were sent to the periphery of the Soviet Union were victims of the Soviet system. The second theme is the contribution of the Russian population to the development of Latvia. Often the two themes are intertwined. A middle-aged woman declares:

"My father was sent to the Baltic region in 1946. He was an engineer and for many years he participated in the process of restoration of the harbors in Lithuania and Latvia. All the major harbors were practically destroyed during the war and it was mainly Russian workers and Russian engineers who rebuilt them. They were doing work no Latvians could or would do. It was a difficult life for us, we had to move on all the time, we lived in many cities in Lithuania and Latvia and I went to many different schools. At that time they [the Latvians] did not mind the educated Russian workers, but today we are treated like slaves."

A elderly veteran who served during the Second World War recounts:

"My friends and I gave our blood for the liberation of Latvia during the war, we were met with flowers by the Latvian people every time we liberated another Latvian town. Today they call us occupants. "

His friend--a female veteran who served in the war as a nurse--points out; "We did not have any choice, we were ordered from Moscow to go to Latvia and settle here". In the official definition, ethnic Russians are "occupants". For the Latvian nationalists, ethnic Russians constitute the main source of Latvia's problems are obvious in these accounts.

Finally, the family's biography is often used to stress the advantage of internationalism. A typical statement of such internationalism is: "My ancestors are Russians, Poles, Jews, Byelorussians and Lithuanians. I consider myself a Russian, but if a Latvian says to me, 'I feel I am a Russian' then he is a Russian to me." Hence, consanguine relations are important but they do not determine identity. The idea of nationality among ethnic Russians in Latvia is based on a fundamentally different model from the present Latvian one. As mentioned above, the model upon which the Latvians build their state is the model of the ethnic nation. The Russians, for their part, apply a model of participation: through active participation one can become a Russian. The explicitness of this model is due partly to the Russians' bitterness over being excluded from a society they consider themselves part of and partly attributable to the Soviet notion of internationalism, which has been influential among ethnic Russians in Latvia. Several informants pointed out; "We were not thinking 'this is Latvia and this is Russia.' It was one country for us before the independence". One informant explicitly states that she cannot give up the idea of one country; "Right now I am living in my home country, my home country is the Soviet Union".

The Past as a Lost Country

A paradoxical feature of the present situation is that the awareness of the biography of one's family coexists with a general sense of discontinuity, rupture and lack of knowledge of the past. Rather than being a foreign country (Lowenthal 1985), the past is a lost country. If people tend to create their history as the interface between a feeling of decay and a feeling of antiquity (Hastrup 1992:104; Lowenthal 1985: 125), the ethnic Russians are in a very peculiar situation: the feeling of decay exists, while the sense of antiquity is constituted by a sense of lost antiquity.

The majority of my informants did not regard the Soviet period as their history. The institutionalization of a political culture and political holidays, the establishment of an official indisputable Soviet history, the fear of passing on to one's children cultural knowledge and non-communist traditions (especially of religious character) and the lack of access to written sources about the period prior to the Russian Revolution all play a role in creating a sense of discontinuity with the past. A young woman explains:

"Seventy-three years with a situation where people could not preserve their traditions means that we do not know how to do. My grandmother, she is more than eighty years old. She was born before 1917, so she knows all our traditions, but she is too old to teach me."

A middle-aged man points out:

"My parents were brought up in the Soviet system. They never taught me the history of Russia. You must understand that the Soviet system was in our blood. "

The idea that Latvia's history simply stopped progressing with the revolution in 1917 makes the Soviet period into a kind of historical parenthesis. This leaves many ethnic Russians in a state of social and moral confusion, such that they try to connect their own life histories to a more innocent, pre-Soviet time, a time when morality and religious belief were more acceptable.

Several elderly Russian informants commented upon the Soviet period in terms of the demise of religious traditions. They often described the confusion they experienced when they first encountered the discrepancy between the morals of the family and the morals in the public realm. They stressed the sadness and impotence they felt in witnessing their own children and grandchildren's decline of religious consciousness. An informant in his mid-sixties comments upon life among Riga's community of Old Believers (see note 1):

When I was a boy in the first Latvian Republic, I was a normal Old Believer. After the war there was a lot of propaganda in schools. They said, "Join the Pioneers" and "A Komsomol member cannot believe in God," so you see many families they lived with two sets of morals--at home there was one, at the school the other. So in general socialism created an atmosphere where you could not imagine telling anyone that you were a Christian. I continued to be an Old Believer, but I could not pass the belief on to my daughter as much as I would have liked. Now I see that she has not gotten that force which a strong belief creates, and I am afraid that her children haven't received it either.

Another informant in the same age group, a member of the Russian Orthodox Congregation, tells a similar story from his childhood in Southern Russia:

"When I was a child I had a crucifix on the wall over my bed. My mother used to pray with me in the evening and she always ended the prayers by kissing the crucifix. But when I started school the crucifix disappeared, and she stopped the prayers in the evening. I think she was simply afraid that I could encounter problems because of our belief."

The avoidance of adopting the Soviet period as one's history reflects the negative valuation of the social and cultural practices of that period. The knowledge of the

family's biography becomes a means of individualizing history. Emphasis on individual narratives helps create a distance to events one wants not to be part of. The individualized form of history is further connected to the very local negotiation between different groups in present-day Latvian society. Part of this negotiation involves locating the responsibility--and thereby culpability--for the events of the past fifty years. In the Soviet period, the majority of ethnic Latvians associated ethnic Russians with Soviet power. The Russians attempt to refute this accusation by stressing that Russian culture and Russian traditions also suffered because of Soviet rule; i.e., that they were victims, too. Some ethnic Russians remark that the ethnic Latvians had cultural support for their by virtue of being in Latvia, while there was a lack of support for the diaspora Russians. A middle-aged woman comments on the Russians' cultural deprivation:

"We did not get anything. National theaters and local stages were built for their song and dance festivals all over Latvia, but nothing was done for us. We just came here to work."

The feeling of being out of touch with the past is fueled by the politicization of ethnic Latvian folklore. The famous song festivals in which thousands of Latvians participated, so praised by Westerners for their symbolic resistance in the Soviet period, eventually giving name to the "Singing Revolution", play an important role in the local dialogue about who can define authentic citizens of Latvia.

The paradoxical combination of emigration combined with the stress on the Soviet Union as one country reveal themselves in many family narratives. The awareness of an ignorance about their own past is related to emigration of ancestors: "When my parents came to live here they did not bring their traditions with them," says one informant. Sense of history is confined to a time about which one has no knowledge. It is relegated to a space from where one or one's ancestors have emigrated. But unlike other "homeland" discourses, it is a space dominated by alienation rather than familiarity. Hence one constantly hears statements such as:

"I am Russian, but I am not like Russians in Russia,"
"Russians from Russia say: 'You are not like we are.'"
"The Russians here are more disciplined and more reserved than Russians in Russia."

These kinds of folk models are further animated by fear of involuntary repatriation to Russia. Sentiments about Russia, however, are very complex and contradictory. On one hand people often point out that they experience

feelings of exclusion and alienation in Russia, while on the other hand Russia constitutes the Motherland--the center of Russian culture; the place where one might find some connections to a lost heritage. Images of Russia as the center of energy, as the source of life, as the origin of everything precious are often articulated. Several parents stressed the importance of taking their children to Russia on excursions and visiting the homes of the great 19th Century authors. A university student points out that in recent years she has started to think more about what it means to be Russian:

"Recently when I was in Leningrad visiting some relatives, I walked on the street with my cousin and some of her girlfriends. There was such a special atmosphere on the street, and I said, "This is the Russian spirit." They just looked at me and did not understand me, it is such an unexplainable feeling - the Russian spirit."

Apocalyptic Notions of the Future

Images of the past are also related to notions and anxieties about the future. The individualized form of history does not offer much consolation in imagining the future.

While various ideas of the future are articulated, a common thread is the idea of a Russian man, who due to his nationality lost his job as an officer in the army, explains:

If the nationalists continue the pressure as they do now, then there will be an answer. We supported the People's Front when they started to talk about independence, but now we see that they just surrendered us. The anger is a result of disappointment. It is a very dangerous situation. If a Zhirinovskiy suddenly appears, then we will have a situation like in Yugoslavia.

People expect the material and conceptual collapse they experience in their personal lives to manifest itself on a more collective level. Most Latvian Russians find themselves unable to plan for the immediate or distant future. Not only is the present chaotic, but there is a lack of faith in the future.

Conclusions

The official creation of Latvian history is obsessed with notions of continuity, blood and roots. This is surely understandable in view of its repressed status over the past half century. The one-sided version of Latvian history as the Latvians' ethnic history is questioned and negotiated in the discourses of groups excluded from narrating the national history. It proves difficult, however, to create a

coherent collective alternative to the official version due to the atomistic nature of the Russian community and the social organization of the nuclear family which characterizes this community. While it appears paradoxical that the Russians' general feeling of discontinuity with the past coexists with an extensive knowledge of the biography of the family, the individualized form of history provides a way of responding to both the Soviet past and the Latvian present.

This process of negotiating one's place in history is not without its obstacles. A group, like the Russians, who belong to a category known as "illegal immigrants", "occupants" or simply "aliens" is very much confined by these definitions in their narration of the past and their grasping of the future. When the past appears to be a lost domain, as it does for Latvia's ethnic Russians, it proves difficult to alter the present construction of history. With a lost past and a lack of confidence in their future, the Russians try to cope with the uncertain present of present-day Latvia.

Notes

1. In mid-17th Century the Russian Orthodox Church was reformed and thereby brought closer to the secular power of the Czar. The movement of the Old Believers was created in the rejection of this move (Yemelyanov 1982).

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