Impact of the Ussr State Policy on the Vepsians' Assimilation in the 20th Century

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Abstract

The article describes the impact of the USSR state policy on the socio-cultural development of the Vepsian ethnic group in the 1920-80s. The Vepsians are considered as one of the Finno-Ugric nations affected by different aspects of the USSR national policy (from the national localization in the 1930s to the struggle against the so-called "bourgeois nationalism" and mass political repressions after 1938). The authors of the work pay special attention to the reasons of the Vepsians' migration, considerable reduction of the traditional inhabitation areas and, finally, their assimilation. The aim of the article is to classify these factors and to establish the correlation between their negative impact and the dramatic decrease of the Vepsian population from 32800 in 1926 to 12500 in 1989 (according to the census reports).

Keywords: *Finno-Ugric nations, the Vepsians, national policy, national localization, inhabitation area, ethnic - local, migration, assimilation.*

1. Introduction

Historically, Russia is a multinational country with more than 180 different nations living in its regions. The uniqueness of their cultural traditions is undeniable, and these traditions are our national heritage. However, today a third of the peoples living in Russia can be regarded as small ethnic groups. The total number of them is about 500 thousand people, or 0.3% of the country's population. Unfortunately, today many of them are vanishing. It is a result of various objective and subjective factors connected with natural assimilation, lack of proper social infrastructure in the areas of their compact settlement, as well as with insufficient attention from the state and society to the problems of small nations. After 1917 the inhabitation area of the Vepsians appeared to be located on the territory of the USSR. During the whole period of the state's existence its national policy radically transformed from the development of national identity in the 1920-1930s to the counteraction of its formation in the postwar period, when a complex of negative factors made conditions for the assimilation. These factors included, first of all, artificial administrative division of compact settlement areas, lack of social infrastructure, abolition of settlements, falsification of the census results in the 1970s, as well as the general political course to prevent the rise of national consciousness. We suggest considering in detail the processes mentioned, using the Vepsian population as an example.

2. Materials and Methods

The main sources of the article were the research materials of Russian scientists involved in the study of the subject. Among them there are Z.I. Strogalschikov, I.Y. Vinokurov, N.G. Zaitsev, researchers from the Institute of Language, Literature and History of RAS Karelian Research Centre. Besides, the primary information was borrowed from public resources, scientific publications, periodicals, online publications, as well as from the authors' own experience. We have used the method of comparative analysis to match the trends of the USSR national policy towards the Vepsians and other Finno-Ugric peoples, as well as the historical-situational method to analyze the ethnic issues of the state policy in the period studied.

3. Discussion

Throughout the 20th century the issue of declaring and the stage-wise implementing the principles of the state policy

towards ethnic minorities was urgent for multinational states, the USSR including. The industrialization which was actively carried out in the large countries of the world gave rise to mass labor migration. In addition, the life of indigenous communities based on traditional use of natural resources changed greatly thanks to the increasing government regulation. Besides, the forced transition to collective farming was in contradiction with the traditions of indigenous groups. The period after the revolution of 1917 witnessed the loss of socio-cultural and religious traditions that influenced the nature of intra-ethnic contacts. All this inevitably led to decreasing the number of ethnic minorities. This process is used to be called "assimilation" in modern scientific literature.

The aim of the national localization policy carried out in the USSR in the 1920-1930s was to create equal conditions for the political, cultural and economic development both of ethnic minorities and the so-called "advanced nations". This policy was also targeted at increasing the cultural identity of the peoples living on the territory of the USSR. Besides, the authorities steadily increased the share of the national staff in local administrative bodies in order to strengthen the Bolshevik power at the local level. The overcoming of national inequality was implemented by a system of interrelated measures, benefits and privileges that ensured rapid formation both of the national elite and the working class. Paperwork management, school education and cultural activities were conducted in the languages of the minorities. All this contributed a lot to the institutionalization of ethnicity and to growth of national consciousness [1]. In particular, the development of the Vepsian writing and teachers' training for the areas of their compact settlement were held in research institutes and colleges of Leningrad and Petrozavodsk.

The peoples of the Finno-Ugric group in general and the Vepsians, who inhabited the north-west of the USSR, in particular, were directly dependent on the policy conducted by the government in relation to small ethnic groups. Thus, the highest number of the Vepsian population – 32800 people – was registered at the end of the 1920s, which was due to the process of indigenization that positively influenced the growth of the number of small nations. For comparison, according to the results of the first general census in 1897, there were 26700 Vepsians living in the Russian Empire [2]. It all goes to show that the number of the Vepsians increased in the first quarter of the 20th century.

It should be noted that "Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia", one of the first Acts of the Soviet power, adopted by the Council of People's Commissars in November, 1917, proclaimed free development of national minorities and ethnic groups inhabiting the territory of Russia. The indigenization policy was a logical consequence of this Declaration and had a great influence on the formation of the USSR as a multinational state. Besides, according to the plan of the Soviet authorities, the development of the national languages and cultures, as well as the participation of national staff in local government bodies were supposed to stop the spread of autonomist and separatist sentiments. Thus, in the early 1930s the Vepsian language began to be taught at schools and it was used to teach a number of school subjects. A decision to develop the Vepsian writing was adopted [3], textbooks of the Vepsian language based on the Latin alphabet were created. In the Finno-Ugric regions of Russia research groups were set up to study the ethnography, culture, language and history of ethnic minorities. Leningrad "Society of Finno-Ugric culture" published several collections of articles on the subject [4]. In 1927 two national regions were established in the places of compact settlement of the Vepsians [5]. Favorable development conditions resulted in the rise of the minority's demographic potential.

It should be mentioned that intercultural contacts of the Vepsian and Russian population were traditional in the pre-Soviet period too and the assimilation of the Vepsians was historically determined by the Russian influence [6]. Seasonal work, temporary as it was, can be regarded as a prototype of labor migration in the Soviet period. Frontier conditions of the Vepsian borderland area with Russian territories, the traditions of religious festivals and fairs, and the existence of seasonal work suggested interethnic marriages. However, it is necessary to say that the purposeful government policy aimed at the Vepsians' artificial assimilation can be referred exactly to the Soviet period of 1938-1988.

In 1937 the USSR changed its policy of nation building. The attitude of the Soviet authorities to national minorities was transformed a lot. It was especially important for the people living on the frontier and close to the state borders, e.g. the representatives of the Finn- Ugric group. The positive trend of ethnic self-determination was substituted by "the struggle against bourgeois nationalism" which finally turned into the struggle against the idea of national identity as it is. At the same time Vepsian national schools in their inhabitation areas were shut down. This process, accompanied by repressions against national educationalists, authors of textbooks, teachers and other representatives of the emerging national intelligencia, defeated the national education system.

The administrative-territorial disintegration of the Vepsians which slowed down the processes of consolidation of the people is another negative factor that directly influenced the sharp decline of the Vepsian population at the end of the 1930s. In the Russian Empire the Vepsians lived in different districts of the Novgorodskaya, Cherepovetskaya, Olonetskaya provinces. This administrative division was kept after the revolution of 1917 as well, when the Vepsians were inhabitants of the Leningradsky, Vologdsky regions and the Republic of Karelia.

Political repressions of the late 1930s caused irreparable damage to the population of the Vepsians. Before World War II, the territory of Vepsian inhabitation was regarded as a possible battle ground. The Vepsians were considered by the Soviet authorities as potential opponents in the coming war. Therefore, repressions against them were supposed to be a necessary preventive measure [6].

In 1938 a secret policy aimed at the Vepsians' rapid assimilation was begun. The Soviet state gradually introduced the policy of "integrating" all nations into a "socialist unity" and creating a "new historical community – the Soviet people". According to this ideology, further identical existence of minority ethnic groups seemed meaningless [7].

Industrialization, reformation of the administrative-territorial units, as well as a difficult economic situation in the post-war period caused processes of labor migration. The Vepsians left the original inhabitation areas, moving to big cities of the north-west of the country (Leningrad and Petrozavodsk) and entering into exogamous marriages. This migration undermined the cultural fundamentals of the ethnic group. In addition, traditional factors of intra-ethnic contacting in the pre-revolutionary period indicated by A.V. Petukhov (the so-called temple and patron saint festivals and fairs [8]) did not work in the Soviet time.

All these factors launched a serious blow at the Vepsian ethno-cultural development and strengthening their spiritual unity and predetermined a sharp reduction of their population to 16400 people by the year of 1959. Being too short, the period of forming the Vepsian ethnic identity did not bring positive results.

World War II brought even more negative factors when the near-front zone expanded and it was necessary to evacuate the Vepsian people from a number of villages in the Vologodsky region. The resettlement caused sharp fall of the living standards of the Vepsians. Besides, the topography and soil structure of the new lands made their cultivating hard. That's why the local authorities decided to abolish the most part of the Vepsian settlements of the Vologodsky region in the late 1950s, thus interrupting the intra-ethnic contacts and forcing the migration of Vepsian population [9].

The disappearance of the Vepsian inhabitation areas in Leningradsky region and the Republic of Karelia, post-war economic break-down, bad roads and territorial disunity cut off Vepsians' ethnic ties in these regions.

In the 1960s it was extremely difficult to provide the Vepsians from remote villages with social security protection. Projects of interconnecting Vepsians settlements with a road network failed. The forced migration continued. At the same time the authorities pursued the policy of artificial assimilation of the Vepsians, refusing to register them as Vepsians during the population census.

Some positive tendencies aimed at supporting the national identity of indigenous peoples began to emerge in the last years of the Soviet state existence. This resulted in the increase of the number of the Vepsian people according to the results of the 1989 census [10]. This period which coincided, however, with the cessation of the Soviet Union, is considered to be a revival of the Vepsian identity [11]. "Society of Vepsian Culture" created at that time significantly contributed to developing projects of cultural and economic renaissance of traditional inhabitation areas of the Vepsians. Unfortunately, not all of them were implemented.

The demographic ageing predetermined further reduction of Vepsian population and drove the ethnic group to the brink of depopulation. Today we can conclude that during the Soviet period the number of the Vepsians decreased by more than 2,5 times. National localization of the 1930-1937s was the only positive trend of the national policy related to the Vepsians in the USSR.

4. Conclusion

Thus, we can identify the following main reasons of the Vepsian assimilation in the 20th century in the context of the national policy of the USSR. Firstly, the administrative-territorial disintegration of the Vepsians throughout a whole century was worsened by administrative reforms of 1927-1959. Secondly, the political situation that changed after the revolution caused the termination of intra-ethnic contacts. Thirdly, the abrupt termination of the indigenization (national localization) in 1937-1938 and the abolishment of the so-called "unpromising" villages in the 1950-1960s resulted in the disappearance of a large number of settlements where the Vepsians lived and they had to migrate. The World War II and the post-war economic breakdown played their negative role and cut off the intra-ethnic contacting. All these factors had extremely negative influence on the Vepsians' national identity, preservation of their culture and traditional way of life and led to their assimilation.

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