

Ethnic Identity as a Dynamic Process: Ethnic Identity Parameters

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Abstract-The processes happening in the Russian society, such as globalization and urbanization, as well as its demographic situation have had a significant impact on ethnic groups and communities, including their ethnic identity. The purpose of this article is to identify the characteristics of ethnic identity and perceptions of ethnic minority groups, in particular, of Russian Germans living in the Russian Federation (Glazov, Vyatka-Kama region). To achieve the goal, the study used the field research methods to collect the linguistic material; sociolinguistic questioning and interviewing; socially differentiated analysis of the language material. The study analyzes the following ten parameters of ethnic identity in relation to the Russian Germans of Glazov: common historical fate, shared territory, religion, mode of life, family patterns, folklore, traditional crafts, behavior standards, psychological makeup, and ethnic language.

The findings of the study suggest that ethnic identity of the Russian Germans is a changeable dynamic category. Certain distinctive characteristics of ethnic identity are developed under the influence of objective reasons (political system, ethnic policy of the state, territorial administration), as well as personal and subjective reasons (preserving the language, culture and traditions).

This article will be of interest to researchers in the field of German dialectology and German speech islands.

Keywords-*German ethnic community, characteristics of ethnic identity*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that modern globalization, intensive intercultural contacts, changes in the structure of society, and urbanization have an impact on interethnic relations, including ethnic identification. Ethnic identification or ethnic identity is a universal category, with some of its features being highlighted in scientific works on ethnology and ethno-linguistics. The works by the leading domestic and foreign scientists (Arutyunov [1], Bardzini [2], Bromley [3], Mead [4], Riggs [5], Tishkov [6], etc.) provide a very important contribution to our understanding of ethnic identity. We understand ethnic identity as a cultural genetic program that is developed in

the process of century-long connections and relationships, as a result of socialization and formation of a respective living environment.

The following characteristics are taken as distinctive factors (parameters) of ethnic identity: 1) common historical fate, 2) shared territory, 3) religion, 4) mode of life, 5) family patterns, 6) folklore, 7) traditional crafts, 8) behavior standards, 9) shared features of psychological makeup, 10) ethnic language. With respect to the Russian Germans living in the Udmurt republic, in particular, in the city of Glazov, the above factors can be studied within the following aspects [cf. 7]:

1) The historical and demographic aspect which means obtaining and summarizing the data (including statistical one) regarding the geographic distribution and the number of Russian Germans in the region, the age structure, and ancestry. The following parameters of ethnic identity refer to this aspect: common historical fate, shared territory.

2) The cultural aspect which means studying the culture of Russian Germans; the following parameters of ethnic identity refer to this aspect: religion, mode of life, family patterns, folklore, traditional crafts, behavior standards, shared features of psychological makeup.

3) The sociolinguistic and linguistic aspect which deals with the so-called "linguistic biography" of the respondents and their knowledge of the native German language. This includes the parameter of the ethnic language of the Russian Germans of Glazov.

The parameters manifest themselves in the range of "dominant – recessive" which correlates with the living conditions of the ethnos (ethnic group), namely, politico-administrative, socio-cultural, interethnic conditions. Consequently, ethnic identity is a construct that changes over time.

The article further describes the parameters of ethnic identity of the Russian Germans of Glazov in more detail; the study started in 2007 and is currently ongoing.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Currently the German ethnic group of Glazov consists of 176 people, according to 2010 All-Russia Population Census (260 people in 2002); the decrease in the number is explained by the natural population decline in the older age group and internal migration in Russia.

The study aims at identifying the characteristics of ethnic identity and perceptions of ethnic minority groups, in particular, the group of Russian Germans living in Glazov.

To achieve the goal, the study used the field research methods to collect the linguistic material; sociolinguistic questioning and interviewing; socially differentiated analysis of the language material including observations on the functioning of the language of the Russian Germans in various communicative situations. The methods allow us to make a comprehensive analysis of the observed phenomena achieving a high degree of objectivity and reliability.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

The Russian Germans of Glazov are a specific ethnic community. It should be noted that Russian Germans do not belong to autochthonous ethnic groups. Before XX century, the representatives of this nation did not constitute an integral ethnic group in contrast to the compact settlements of Russian Germans, including hundreds of colonies in Ukraine, the Volga region, Transcaucasia, St. Petersburg Province, as well as Siberia and Central Asia. These people were not peasants who emigrated from rural areas of Germany, but they were qualified specialists and representatives of the so called intelligentsia. Starting from the middle of XX century, there appeared places in the Vyatka-Kama region where Russian Germans lived in rather compact groups.

The German ethnic community of Glazov is comprised of the descendants of deportees who were conveyed to work at industrial facilities of the forest and peat mining industries under the conditions of the special commandant's office regime in 1949-1950. The Federal National Cultural Autonomy of the Russian Germans was established in Russia in 2011, with the Glazov branch of the Federal National Cultural Autonomy of the Russian Germans operating in Izhevsk, the regional center. The ethnic specificity of the Russian Germans is still preserved in everyday life; it has also manifested itself quite prominently in the sphere of spiritual culture recently, and, especially, in their effort to preserve the native language (dialect) [cf. 8].

Let us describe in more detail each of the 10 parameters of ethnic identity in relation to the ethnic group of the Russian Germans of Glazov.

A. *The Historical and Demographic Aspect: Ethnic Identity Parameters*

- *Common historical fate, shared territory*

We have established that Russian Germans treat their past, especially their family history, with great respect. The past for them is not just a collection of dry facts and dates, but intimate personal experience. Historical memory is a key marker of identity: the events of the mid-XX century (deportation, labor army, special settlements), followed by the mass relocation of Germans from the CIS countries to Germany in the 1990s, influenced the development of the collective consciousness of Russian Germans. This factor defines the entire German population of Russia.

The Volga region retains its significance and attractiveness as the "historical cradle" of the Russian Germans; they perceive it as a "lost" homeland and an alternative to leaving for Germany. The history of the Volga German ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) has been mythologized, and the past has been idealized, which is quite characteristic of ethnic consciousness. It is vividly reflected in the folklore of the Russian Germans.

The traditional principles of family life, customs, traditions, family values of the Russian Germans of Glazov demonstrate the fact that traditional ethnic values are preserved as dominant ones in the structure of ethnic identity. The research data also suggests that such dominant features of ethnic mentality as sense of responsibility, self-discipline, law-abiding nature, good manners, and thrift are respected and preserved.

As for the other parameter of ethnic identity, shared territory, it is not valid under conditions of the urban, ethnically diverse environment (ethnic Germans do not belong to autochthonous ethnic groups of Russia).

B. *The Cultural Aspect: Ethnic Identity Parameters*

- *Religion, mode of life, family patterns, folklore, traditional crafts, behavior standards, shared features of psychological makeup*

According to Zadvornov [9], the ethnic groups living in the North Caucasus have managed to preserve their integrity and authenticity thanks to their adherence to their traditions, customs, and, especially, religion.

A diaspora is defined by researchers as a stable group of people of the same ancestry, living in a foreign ethnic environment outside their historical homeland (or outside the area of resettlement of their people) and having social institutions for the development and functioning of this community [10]. When we describe a diaspora and the features of its formation and functioning, it is impossible to ignore the factor of religion. Toschenko and Chapytkova [10] consider that the history of some diasporas shows that religion becomes a consolidating factor in uniting the representatives of the same faith (they are often people of the same nationality), giving the example of an important role of the Greek Catholic Church in uniting the Ukrainians in Canada and Latin America.

Religion is a powerful ethno-consolidating factor. However, the decades of the so called "state atheism" have

largely destroyed the religious consciousness. The Evangelical Lutheran Church and its activities have been preserved only in major cities of the country; it is not functioning outside the metropolitan areas. However, the religious rituals and traditions of celebrating Easter and Christmas, as remembered from childhood, are kept in the Glazov German community. They observe the traditional Protestant Advent (a month before Christmas), decorate the house and rooms, cook the traditional dishes for Christmas and Easter. It should be noted, however, that Lutheranism continues to remain the leading religion among Russian Germans only thanks to the older generation. The empirical data suggest that the older generation (50 years and older), who belong to the Lutheran church, are the bearers of traditional ethnic identity. They are fluent in German and know the history of their family and their people. This generation is an “ethnic core” and it retains a noticeable influence on other age groups.

The mode of life (dwelling, food, hygiene issues) is also ethno-specific. Whether it is an apartment, a cottage or a modest country house, they are maintained strictly clean, well-groomed, reasonably comfortable.

The Russian Germans have preserved the traditions of decorating homes with pillowcases and tablecloths similar to those used in Ukraine and in the Volga region; they keep towels as a remembrance. They carefully preserve old photos, including wedding ones. The traditional clothing has not been preserved; we have only recorded some memories of skirts and sweaters home-made by Glazov Germans. One can notice the habit of Germans to be dressed very carefully; even work outfits are combined with shirts with a white or blue collar. The traditions of house-building and gardening are also preserved in a specific way. There are summer kitchens, good barns and buildings for cattle and poultry, vegetable gardens next to the residential buildings. Watering with the help of various hoses and devices is widely used in the gardens in addition to conventional watering.

The family patterns are also quite specific. 95% of the Russian Germans are married; there are very few single Germans. The families are, as a rule, multiethnic, with two children. Divorces are very rare. The nationality of children in the passport is stated in accordance with the child’s choice (often the son is registered as German, the daughter as Russian, or vice versa).

Folklore. Our respondents know proverbs and sayings, fairy tales and fairy tale characters, they know ethnic songs. The rehearsals of the German choir in Glazov are regularly held. German melos has changed on the Russian soil: from polyphony to unison singing, open sound, and more melodiousness.

Traditional crafts. Blacksmiths, watchmakers, and carpenters are not in demand in modern industrialized society. These occupations have rather become a hobby.

The behavior standards correlate with the *shared features of psychological makeup* to a certain extent. Such

qualities as diligence, a sense of responsibility, efficiency, reasonableness, empathy, willingness to help people and friends in a difficult life situation regardless of ethnicity are quite stable in their manifestation. Germans respect their ancestors, know the family history and record it. In the course of the study we communicated more with women, and we were surprised that such habits as idle talking, gossiping, interpreting other people’s words (these are gender-marked features) are not typical of them. Russian Germans take tender care of their elderly fellow citizens. These are 6 people aged 90 years and older; they are former labor army soldiers who worked in the labor army for 5–8 years.

C. The Sociolinguistic and Linguistic Aspect

- *The ethnic language of the Russian Germans of Glazov*

It is well known that the ethnic language is one of the most important factors of an ethnos, reflecting the diversity of its people’s life, their spiritual potential, and their unique world view. The language competence (verbal behavior) of the Germans of Glazov is extremely heterogeneous: from a complete denial of the language to well-developed language skills. Some respondents (about 20%) learned German themselves or attended language courses; they have a solid linguistic competence. Others can understand an intermediate-level text; they know everyday speech clichés and understand simple sentences. Those who have studied their mother tongue in the family are speakers of the still surviving Upper German dialects, including Swabian, as well as Low German dialects. Of course, a foreign language environment – it is the Russian language used in everyday communication – has a strong interfering influence at all levels. The syntax is simplified (word order, closed-in structure of the sentence are not observed); declinable word-forms are contaminated. Russian lexemes are frequent in speech (*nu* (well), *da* (yes), *tak* (so)). The prosodic pattern of the phrase, unlike in German, is quite smooth, less rhythmicized; the speech tempo is slower under the influence of the Russian language. In addition to the necessity to use Russian in everyday communication, the use of the native language was also hampered by a negative attitude towards the German language at school and at work in the 1950s. There is oral evidence that children in kindergartens were punished for speaking German. The generation of those who were born in the 1950s could not learn their ethnic language in natural conditions (which is the most effective way), i.e. communicating within the family. However, there are also examples of very high motivation to master German at a mature age, which is done by either taking a course or by means of family communication. Since the 1990s, Germany has sponsored German courses for adults and children in the National Cultural Autonomy.

IV. SUMMARY

The results of the survey of the Russian Germans of Glazov concerning the issues related to their self-perception and personal identity allow us to suggest that

ethnic identity of the Germans of Glazov can be characterized as a dynamic phenomenon. It differs significantly in different age groups. The study confirmed our hypothesis about the consolidating role of the parameter of common historical fate as one of the dominant parameters of ethnic identity of Russian Germans. Russian Germans are united by shared memories of difficulties, hardships, and the injustice of deportation and the following difficult years. This creates a powerful emotional consolidating atmosphere. One can see its influence on the generation of children and grandchildren who get interested in the family history and try to learn it; they learn the German language, folklore and try to learn the national traditions. Now a new generation of Germans is growing up; they are full-fledged citizens of Russia.

Ethnic identity is a changeable dynamic category. Its parameters are influenced by objective reasons: the political system, the ethnic policy of the state, territorial administration, as well as by personal and subjective reasons: motivation to preserve the ethnic language, culture and traditions. The majority of Russian Germans consider Russia their homeland; this fact revealing strongly marked civic identity. At the same time, the same majority also believe that Russian Germans should preserve their traditions, language and historical heritage, which is the evidence of clearly defined ethnic identity.

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