

The old-time Russian population in Estonia

Sergei Issakov (Tartu)

In the Estonian media, assertions have been frequently made (particularly in the 1990s) that the Russians in Estonia are a newly arrived element, that they are “strangers” who have nothing in common with the local cultural tradition, that they are “people without roots” who have no bonds with the past, with the history of the country. Aside from articles written by nationalist-minded journalists and politicians, statements of this kind were made by Estonian political scientists and sociologists as well, though in a milder way. An exception was sometimes made only for the Old Believers who live on the lake Peipsi coast.

I would by no means deny the special role of Old Believers in the history of the Russian community in Estonia and I am delighted by the considerable progress made in the recent years in Old Belief studies by P. Varunin and scholars at the University of Tartu. However, I cannot agree with that kind of assertions about “aliens”. Most of the Russians residing today in the Republic of Estonia are not at all “people without roots”. They have taken roots in Estonia – it depends, of course, how deeply. But it is no mere chance that Russians who move from Estonia to Russia tend to feel very uncomfortable.

The process of their “rooting” has undoubtedly been facilitated by the presence among the Russians in Estonia of a specific element whom I would term “the old-time Russian population of the Republic of Estonia”. It includes the descendants of all Russians who had been living in Estonia before the Soviet period; they can be viewed as “native” Russians and they are by no means Old Believers only. The complete disregard of this element by Estonian scholars has always surprised me. Even the number of those people is unknown.

We should start our discourse from afar. The Estonian researchers tend to ignore the fact that the Russians have been living on the Estonian soil for a thousand years at least. The earliest indisputable proofs of existence of Russian (more precisely, eastern Slavic) settlements in Estonia are dated back to the first half of the eleventh century. The Estonian historians do not deny this.

To those who are interested in the subject, I would recommend my new book *The Road Thousand Years Long: Russians in Estonia. The History of Culture. Part One (Путь длиной в тысячу лет. Русские в Эстонии. История культуры. Часть I. (In Russian). - Tallinn, 2008. 312 pages)*. In this book, the Russian culture in Estonia is analysed over a millennium. Since even an outline of its main points would take too much space, I would confine myself to some

examples that would demonstrate how weighty is the material on the history of Russian culture in Estonia.

From the 14th to 16th centuries, several prominent figures from the Russian colony in Tartu were sanctified by the Orthodox church. It is since that period that there are Vene (i.e., Russian) streets both in Tartu and Tallinn. The first written description of Tartu was made by a Russian author. In the seventeenth century, Russians were the most numerous ethnic group in the town of Narva. The oldest monument of Russian literature in Estonia, *The Lamentation Over the River Narva* by Leonty Belous, is dated 1665. In the first half of the 19th century, some remarkable Russian cultural centres started emerging in the university circles of Tartu, as well as in Tallinn, “at the Reval spa resort”. These were not of regional scale only but of importance for the Russian culture by and large. A school of Russian student poetry that emerged in Tartu gave birth to the genre of student song. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries there was already a wide network of Russian societies and organisations, educational establishments and museums in Estonia (like the well-known Lavretsovsky Museum in Narva); many Russian newspapers and books were published there; Estonia was visited by prominent Russians composers, writers and artists whose art reflected the life and history of Estonia; and so on and so forth. To sum up, the Russian culture with its traditions was represented in Estonia well before 1918. There lie the origins of the present old-time Russian population of Estonia. Let us remember that cultural traditions are persistent, viable, hard to eradicate, and able to revive like a phoenix from the ashes.

While the roots of the old-time Russian population are found in pre-revolutionary times, its actual foundation was laid in the first independent Republic of Estonia of 1920–1940. Until 1920, the local Russians did not perceive themselves as a distinct ethnic-cultural community; they were part of the Great Russian ethnic entity dominant in the Russian Empire, and were fed by the all-Russian culture. When the 1920 peace treaty with the Soviet Russia Estonia was signed, the local Russians were cut off from their homeland. They could not rely on the Soviet Russia’s support, since the USSR took a negative stance toward Russians abroad, viewing them as directly or implicitly anti-Soviet oriented and hostile to the communist system. Culturally, Russian residents in Estonia were left to their own devices.

The Russians in Estonia have managed to build a community of their own. They were 92 thousand strong (8,2% of the total population). They resided mostly in villages on the eastern outskirts of the country, primarily in those territories around Narva and Petseri that were retroceded to Estonia under the 1920 peace treaty. Some rural districts were entirely populated by Russians, and had Russian ethnic environment with schools, churches and monuments of old Russian culture.

The number of émigrés among the Russian population of Estonia was small, up to 15–18 thousands, and they concentrated mostly in towns. However, it is important to note that, among local Russians, émigrés made up an influential and relatively strong layer, as they were a highly educated elite of the intelligentsia.

Russians did not actively participate in Estonian politics, although their own political life was strikingly diverse: all Russian political parties and ideological trends, both old and new, were represented. Instead, cultural life of the Russians was intensive, its core idea being preservation of their nationality and ethnic identity. This could only be done by preserving and developing their native culture and language. By the end of 1930s, Russians in Estonia were a distinct ethnocultural group with their own subculture.

The cultural life of Russians in Estonia was centered around numerous societies; in 1923 an association named the Union of Russian Educative and Charitable Societies was formed. With more than 90 member organisations by the end of 1930s, the Union initiated annual Days of Russian Education – unique Russian festivals with diverse events. This example was followed by Russians in other countries who started holding days of Russian culture. The Estonia's Russians thus became founders of important cultural events all over the vast Russian diaspora.

Russian cultural societies and grammar schools had their choirs and folk orchestras, sometimes of a nearly professional level. Taking example from Estonian song festivals, all-Estonian Russian song festivals were conducted in 1937 and 1939.

In Estonia, there were nearly hundred Russian elementary schools and some Russian grammar schools with excellent teaching staff. Russian scientists founded a Russian Academic Group.

There were two Russian theatres in Tallinn and in Narva; both had excellent actors, choreographers and former lead singers of the Bolshoi Theatre (Moscow) and the Mariinsky Theatre (St. Petersburg). There were many Russian newspapers (nearly hundred total), books and magazines published in Estonia. For Russians abroad, Estonia was one of their centres of literature: at least thirty writers deserving to be mentioned were residing and working here (indeed, most know only Igor Severyanin). Many prominent Russian painters, composers and architects were working here.

Meanwhile, the difficult process of integration of Russians into the Estonian community was going on in the republic. Differentiation in attitudes was quite noticeable. Since integration was not compulsory, one might avoid “integrating”. Young people, however, preferred to go this way, guided by understanding that it was difficult to establish themselves in the local community without knowledge of the Estonian language, culture and mentality. On the other hand, most of

young people were disinclined to abandon their ethnic identity, language and culture. No mass shift in ethnic identity took place; still, some people actually adopted the Estonian language and culture. Many of them changed their Russian surnames for Estonian ones. It is not widely known that Jüri Järvet, a prominent Estonian actor of the 20th century, was originally named Juri Kuznetsov; the same goes for physicist Paul Kard (Pavel Kudrjajtsev), poet and literary critic Aleksis Rannit (Aleksei Dolgošov), painter Süvalo (Štšerbakov) and others. That was a natural process that took place among Russian expats in other countries as well.

All considered, a significant contribution was made by Russians to establishing of the Estonian state and developing of its economy and culture. Regrettably, this is often considered not worth remembering today. The young Republic of Estonia had to build its system of public government from scratch. There was shortage of experts. Russians lawyers played a decisive role in accomplishing the task of codifying the old Russian legislation and adapting it to the new conditions. They were advising and consulting Estonian ministers of finance, justice, communications, etc. At the University of Tartu, there were twelve Russian lecturers and professors (once again, mostly lawyers). Russian military experts organised the Estonian military education, above all the General Staff Courses. Their services were waived later when Estonian experts came to the scene. Russian engineers have played an important role in establishing the Estonian oil shale mining and processing industry, as well as in developing the refrigeration technique (M. Zarotšentsev, a world-known expert in refrigerators, deserves to be mentioned here).

In art, the role of Russians choreographers and dancers in the making of the Estonian national ballet was particularly significant. Before the 1910s, the Estonians did not have ballet as a separate form of art. It was founded by Russians choreographers, while the decisive role in training local dancers was played by Russians ballet schools in Estonian towns, above all by the studio of Jevgenia Litvinova in Tallinn.

There were many Russian teachers as well at the Tallinn Conservatoire and the Tartu Music High School. Sergei Mamontov, former concertmaster at the Bolshoi Theatre, made a great effort to help establish the ensemble of the Estonia National Opera. The school of Varvara Malama in Tallinn produced famous singers as Militsa Korjus, Vera Neelus and Georg Taleš. Olga Oboljaninova-Krimmer, a Russian artist, was actually the founder of Estonian art of theatrical costume. Russian sportsmen like Nikolai Stepulov who won Estonia silver in boxing at the 1936 Olympic Games, and Russians basketball players who were the Estonian national team's backbone in the 1930s, should not be forgotten, too.

In order not to recur to this subject, I would also point at the remarkable contribution of some public figures of Russian origin (notably, from the old-time Russian population) to the Estonian culture in the later 1940s–1980s period. Among them are film director Grigori Kromanov, the author of perhaps the most popular Estonian film *The Last Relic*; writer Nikolai Baturin, maker of a new style in modern Estonian literature; basketball player Ioann Lõssov, Merited Master of Sports and the USSR basketball team captain; astronomer Grigori Kuzmin; medical scientist Pavel Bogovski; singer Viktor Gurjev; popular variety artist Vladimir Sapožnin and many others.

However, let us return to the old-time Russian population in Estonia. Its reaction to the summer events of 1940 and to the Soviet annexation of the Republic of Estonia was complex. A considerable part of peasantry in Eastern Estonia, as well as urban masses and left-minded youth, greeted the Red Army with flowers and welcomed the establishment of a new regime. Some of them perceived this as establishment of equality and social justice missing, in their opinion, in the former Republic of Estonia. For others, it was a heartwarming reunion with fellow Russians and a return to their homeland's lap. Most of the émigrés and prosperous Russians, however, were frightened by the arrival of the Red Army and the new authority, and were reasonably concerned about their lives.

Arrests of Russian political, public and cultural figures were not long in coming. The first to be arrested were people who had emigrated from Russia. Oddly enough, first arrests were made by the Estonian political police even before 21 June 1940, the date when the Soviet regime was finally established. The Estonian political police obviously acted under the orders of the Soviet NKVD. Detainees were later moved from prison cells of the Estonian police to torture chambers of the NKVD where their fate was determined in a swift and decisive manner...

In the second half of 1940 and the first half of 1941, almost all leading Russian figures were arrested and either shot or perished in concentration camps. Among them were clergymen (bishop Ioann Bulin), writers (V. Nikiforov-Volgin, V. Guštšik, M. Karamzina), singer N. Suursööt (N. Ponomarjov), actress J. Garrai, actor and theatre worker N. Ustjužaninov (one of the few who survived but was never permitted to return to Estonia), prominent Russians teachers. The precise number of repressed Russians is unknown but I would say with confidence that their share (among the total Russian population) was not less, and most likely even higher, than that of repressed Estonians.

All Russian newspapers were closed immediately. The Russian theatre in Tallinn ceased to exist. Nearly all writers fell silent. An atmosphere of fear and psychological shock descended, occasionally assuming Kafkian style during arrest and custody. The many-faceted activities of

Russians in Estonia were basically extinguished, the established structure of their community was ruined and annihilated.

Then there came a short period of German occupation from August 1941 to September 1944. For Russians in Estonia, it was no joy as well. They were treated rather warily by German authorities and their local henchmen, the more so as they often tried to help Soviet POWs who were dying of famine and deprivation in German camps. With rare exceptions, Russians were neither delighted with Germans' military triumphs nor grieved by their defeats. Both Soviet and German occupations made them suffer. There were quite a few paradoxical cases like that of writer Vladimir Guštšik who perished in Stalin's camps while his son, a talented young poet Oleg Guštšik, was shot either by the Germans or their henchmen.

When it became clear that German troops would soon leave Estonia and the Red Army (now called Soviet Army) would retake its territory, many Russians who had survived the repressions of 1940–41 faced once again the prickly problem of what to do next. They expected nothing good from restoration of the Soviet regime. Thus, along with the large flow of the Estonians, many Russians emigrated to the West in 1944 and wound up in the United States after the war. For many it was their second emigration. Among those who settled down in the U.S. were Jüri Ivask and Boris Nartsissov, greatest poets of the post-war Russia abroad. In Estonia, virtually nothing was left of the once strong Russian cultured elite...

In the beginning of 1945, the right bank of the Narva River and the Petseri county with a mostly Russian population were attached to the USSR's Russian Republic (RSFSR). As a result, the share of Russians among the population of Estonia shrank to some 20–23 thousand. Instead, a mass migration to Estonia of Russians from other republics of the USSR was started after the war. The commonly known figures need not be quoted.

A new structure of cultural and social life of Russians in the post-war Estonia was shaping in total isolation from old traditions of the local Russian culture. Those traditions were declared 'class alien' to the communist system and therefore ideologically harmful, they were opposed and eradicated. The new culture was shaped after an all-union pattern and primarily by newcomers. The "native" local Russians, now a minority, were largely prevented from taking part in the making of this new culture: they did not fit into it and were distrusted. This new culture was essentially Soviet, not Russian. The paucity of intelligentsia and the almost total absence of a cultured elite played a role as well.

How did the Russian "old-timers" feel in these new conditions?

In the first post-war years they became sharply aware of their difference from the Russian newcomers. I recollect how clearly my grandmother Anna Sergeyevna, who came from simple

country folk, always distinguished “the Russians” (as she called local Russians) from “the Soviets” (newcomers). Indeed, they differed virtually in everything: in their perception of reality, in their attitudes toward religion, in cultural traditions, in everyday mentality, and in language. At the same time, while “the Soviets” felt, so to say, masters of life, the local Russians were second-class citizens according to the official scale of values. Besides, many of them fell victims of the mass repressions in March 1949.

The “adaptation” of local Russians to the Soviet way of life was painful but it was necessary for their survival.

Down to the period of *perestroika*, it was out of the question for local Russians to establish any legal associations. The whole situation promoted a peculiar “atomisation” of the old-time Russian population in Estonia. They have never been a homogeneous community, a solid congregation, neither in the Soviet era nor nowadays. The observation made by Dmitri Mihhailov – that, instead of disappearing, the old Russian diaspora in Estonia has “atomised”, disintegrated into autonomous monads – may be correct. Most often there are separate families and their direct descendants keeping ties with their like.

No doubt, during the half-a-century long Soviet rule the “old-time” Russians, and particularly their descendants, have managed to accommodate to the new system and enter its structures. Time did its work (half a century is a long term), as well as necessity, but their adaptation was also partly promoted by developments taking place among the newcomers, the migrants. Starting from the 1960s, the number of intellectuals among the newcomers was growing; many of them were no more wedded closely to the communist ideology and some even broke with it. After all, due to a number of reasons the atmosphere in Estonia during the Brezhnev and post-Brezhnev times was more liberal than elsewhere in the Soviet Union, contacts with the West were stronger, the pressure of official ideology was less perceptible, and much of what was categorically forbidden in other regions of the USSR was allowed. All this attracted prominent scientists (including the world renown Yury Lotman) and opposition-minded writers (David Samoilov, Sergei Dovlatov) from the Soviet Russia. Local “native” Russians found it easier to find common language with these people. Characteristically, the first illegal associations of Russian dissidents in Estonia at the end of 1960s included both “old” Russians (like Sergei Soldatov) and “newcomers”.

Not incidentally did many Russians support the Estonians’ struggle for independence at the end of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s. At the 3 March 1990 referendum on the restoration of independence of Estonia, approximately 40% of the Russians voted yes, 30% voted no and 30%

did not participate. Among those who voted for independence was certainly the absolute majority of “native” Russians, but there were many “newcomers” as well.

In the independent Republic of Estonia, old-time Russians constitute the best integrated part of the Russian population. Virtually all of them have acquired the Estonian citizenship, most of them master Estonian, and they have escaped many problems former migrants have faced.

How many of them and their descendants have now remained? Regrettably, the number is unknown. The data of the last census is of no assistance either. According to sociologist D. Mihhailov, the number of Russian families who have resided in Estonia for a long time does not exceed fifteen thousand (a decade-old estimate). This would make up over 40 thousand or about ten per cent of the total Russian population of Estonia.

Juri Maltsev in his sociological study (carried out with a small number of respondents in Tallinn only) showed that about 90% of Russian old-timers identify themselves as Russians, while 30 to 40 per cent of their children and grandchildren consider themselves to be Estonians. A sociological study carried out by D. Mihhailov in 1994 revealed that, in their general attitudes, Estonian Russians are closer to Estonians rather than to Russian newcomers. This is natural, taking the similar historical experience of the old-time Russian population to that of the Estonians.

I believe that a distinct ethnocultural group that might be called “Estonian Russians” is shaping slowly but steadily, with its own subculture dissimilar from that prevailing either in the Russian Federation or among Russian residents in the Western Europe and America. The attitudes of Russian old-timers and former migrants, particularly younger people, are getting closer to each other. *A propos*, the events related to "the Bronze soldier" have contributed to this. The rise of a more or less uniform ethnic group of Estonian Russians may be near at hand. A part of Russians, though, would be assimilated, “estonified”; this process is promoted by the education policy of authorities, which in my view is grossly erroneous.

I would conclude with the words from the memoirs of departed great basketball player Ioann Lõssov: “I have cleared my accounts with myself long ago. I count myself as Russian but Estonia is my birthplace and my homeland. Of course I have Russian blood, customs and culture. But I try to openly express this only in an appropriate environment, under appropriate circumstances, or when I feel that this would be understood and accepted. My Estonian friends have frequently said that I am more Estonian than some pure Estonians in terms of blood. It’s not for me to judge. But I have never artificially forced myself to become Estonian. The only thing I have aimed at is to be a good person”.

Certainly not each of “native” Estonian Russians would share the Lõssov’s point of view but there are many who would.