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ETHNOLOGY

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ETHNIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE BELORUSSIAN MIGRANTS IN WESTERN SIBERIA*

This study describes some specific features in the traditional culture of the descendants of the Belorussian settlers living in Western Siberia. Their ancestors left Belorussia from the second half of the 19th to the early 20th century. The character of ethnic and cultural interaction between migrants and the Old Settlers as well as the main markers of ethnic and cultural identity of the Belorussians in Siberia are analyzed using the materials of expeditions to the places of their residence. The ritual of "the Candle," common in the Mogilev Guberniya where the Belorussians departed from and practiced by the migrants, is described in detail. The conclusions of the study sum up the correlation between the principles of settlement of the Belorussians in Siberia and the specific features of their ethnic and cultural identity in their new place of residence.

Keywords: Belorussians, Siberia, traditional culture, peasant migrations, ethnic and cultural interaction.

Introduction

The traditional culture of the Belorussians living in Siberia, whose ancestors settled there as a result of mass peasant migration from the second half of the 19th to the early 20th century, has rarely been the object of special research. This situation was largely conditioned by the prevailing view of the undeveloped ethnic identity of the settlers as well as blurred ethnic and cultural differences between the Belorussians and the Siberian Old Settlers (Starozhily). Indeed, at the time when the areas of compact residence of Belorussians were being formed in Siberia, the ethnic identity of most settlers had not yet been finally formed, as is confirmed by the phenomenon

of the "tuteishina": "If you address such Belorussians with the question who they are in terms of their ethnicity, many can only say that they are 'tuteishie,' that is, local... and they will be fairly skeptical to your statement that they are either Russians or Belorussians: call us what you want..." (Bogdanovich, 2009: 15). As many descendants of Belorussian settlers note, their ancestors most often called their homeland Russia, which indicates that they did not directly identify their homeland with their ethnic character. However, in spite of such tendencies, we can find many examples of how the settlers reproduced their original traditions, brought from their places of departure. Thus, for studying the culture of the Belorussians living in Siberia, it is very important to identify the basic features of their ethnic and cultural identity, often expressed in an implicit and indirect form. This area of research has received consistent development only in the last decade

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thanks to the active collaboration of historians and ethnographers from the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Belarus (Belorusy..., 2000, Ocherki..., 2002). These studies focus on identifying and studying in great detail the unknown and unique elements of the traditional culture of Belorussian settlers and the mechanisms for their preservation or transformation in a new ethnic and cultural environment (Fursova, 2000a, b, 2003; Fedorov, 2009). Comprehensive results of this series of studies are presented in a recently published monograph entitled, "The Belorussians in Siberia: the Preservation and Transformation of Ethnic Culture" (Belorusy v Sibiri..., 2011). The current article also focuses on some aspects of the ethnic and cultural identity of Belorussians in Siberia.

Ethnic and cultural interaction and the principles of settlement

In several regions of Western Siberia, the migrants from Belarus were called "samokhody" (lit. "self-movers"). The locals often explain the origin of the word by the fact that before the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, their ancestors moved to Siberia "under their own power," carrying their belongings on carts. In the Belorussian language, the word "samokhats" means "voluntarily," "at will" (Belaruska-Ruski sloğnik, 2003: 218). Thus, "samokhody" came to Siberia by their own will; they were the most mobile part of the Belorussian peasantry and were not afraid to cover thousands of miles of arduous journey in search for a better life. We can say that the name "samokhod" describes a particular ethnic and cultural status of the Belorussian settlers who eventually became real Siberians while retaining some of the original features of their traditional culture.

The first generations of Belorussian peasants who moved to Western Siberia had a number of differences from the local Old Settlers both in terms of their material and spiritual culture. This situation for a long time supported the mechanisms of ethnic identity of the "samokhody" Belorussians, based on the principle of otherness, and opposition to the local ethnic and cultural environment. Most often the Old Settlers' environment, where the migrants had to exist, was represented by the Chaldons, who formed the majority of the Old Settlers, and the "dvoedany" (Old Believers).

The stories of our informants often speak about conflicts between the migrants and the Old Settlers. Such conflicts particularly often arose in the cases when groups of newly arrived migrants were settled in the villages of Old Settlers on the orders of the government that was carrying out its own resettlement policy. For example, such situations happened in the villages of Mizonovo

and Lokti, located in the present-day Ishim Region of the Tyumen Province. The groups of "pantsirnye boyare" who moved there in the 1850s-1860s from the Vitebsk Guberniya, tried to isolate themselves from the Old Settlers. After their arrival, the village became divided into two parts. A special frontier post was set in the village, marking the border of the Old Settlers' and the newcomers' realms. Even after death, in the village of Mizonovo, the Old Settlers and newcomers had their final resting place in different locations. For these purposes, the cemetery was divided into two parts by a specially dug ditch. A similar situation happened in the village of Lokti. The migrants repeatedly complained to the authorities about the oppression on the part of the Chaldons and asked for separate land to settle on. In this case, the request was granted to the peasants, and they were allowed to found the village of Novye Lokti on the nearby vacant lands (Bagashev, Fedorov, 2010).

This is how M.M. Gromyko described the situation, "Each of the two peasant communities had developed long ago and had gone their own ways in different social, historical, economic, and geographical conditions, happened to be united in the same village and in the same territorial community. The Siberians who spent a lot of time working toward the development of a new territory and founded the village, claimed certain advantages over the strangers who came with everything ready. The migrants, united by the process of moving, and accustomed to a somewhat privileged position compared to other categories of state peasants, did not want to concede" (Gromyko, 1991: 154). There is no doubt that such an opposition of the Old Settlers and newcomers' peasant communities, based on the worldview opposition "ours vs. alien," not only prevented rapid assimilation of the Belorussian migrants to a new place, but also in some cases fostered their ethnic and cultural self-identity.

The opposition to the culture of the local people, along with harsh natural and climatic conditions contributed to the unity of the Belorussians who came to Siberia on various levels of their alliance. The first level was the system of a compact settlement, comprising places of residence located in close proximity to each other, where the Belorussians could engage in trade with each other, get together for holidays, for matchmaking, etc. The local residents identified such communities with distinctive ethnic enclaves – islands of native culture. The second level of alliance was represented by the settlers' community, constituting either the whole settlement (village or hamlet), or parts of it (in the case of mixed settlements). The third level was the family or family clan. It is noteworthy that some informants reported cases of marriages between the members of the same family clan in the history of the "samokhody" villages. Thus, Valentina Maleshina (b. 1948) who lives in the village of Vikulovo of the Tyumen Province, narrates, "Our family came to Siberia from the Mogilev Guberniya in 1916. The relations with the Chaldons and other local residents were not easy, and we were always wary of each other. Thus, the Belorussians kept to themselves. Dad's sister was married to her cousin. There were other cases of marriages with close relatives. This happened because strangers did not accept the Belorussians in marriage; moreover, in these harsh and distant lands it was safer to stick together."

The situation was different in the underdeveloped areas, where the proportion of migrants was much larger than the proportion of epy Old Settlers. The stories of the descendants of the settlers from Belorussia who live there, much less frequently mention opposition to the Old Settlers. On the contrary, examples of ethnic and cultural consolidation between the migrants of different ethnic origin occurred much more often in these areas. This situation was typical for a number of places with compact residence of Belorussians in the Tarsky Region of the Omsk Province (the villages of Ermakovka, Atirka, Bygan, and others). At the time of Stolypin's resettlement, these areas were actively populated and developed by the Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Latvians, Chuvashes, and others. Despite some occasional conflicts between various groups of settlers in the stories of informants and documentary sources, there was a general tendency towards mixed marriages and borrowing of some elements of traditional culture from each other (Bagashev, Fedorov, 2010).

The Belorussians, arriving in many parts of Western Siberia in the late 19th-early 20th century, founded small settlements of the hamlet type. In the new settlements, they tried to reproduce the principles of planning and architecture of farm estates, as well as the methods of household management, traditional for their places of departure. However, already by the 1930s, many hamlets and small villages of the Belorussians had ceased to exist, because "collectivization and socialist forms of agriculture planned for concentration of the population in the centers, unification of cultivated areas, use of new agricultural methods of field production, and different organization of rural everyday life" (Narody..., 2002: 302). As a result of this policy, the population of many hamlets was forcefully united into large collective farm settlements. These processes triggered a major transformation not only in the economic methods, but also in many fundamental features of the traditional culture of Belorussians living in Siberia.

Markers of ethnic and cultural identity of the Belorussians in Siberia

Despite the processes of assimilation and destruction of many forms of traditional culture in the Soviet times, the descendants of Belorussian migrants retained a number of unique ethnic and cultural features which their ancestors brought from their native places. We should try to consider in detail the ways how some of the key markers of ethnic and cultural identity of the Belorussian migrants were preserved or transformed in the new environment.

Flax cultivation was one of the specific features of the Belorussian economic activities in Siberia. Belorussian settlers began to cultivate flax immediately during the development of the tillage lands due to the fact that flax was useful for the preparation of land for the sowing of winter crops and helped to control weeds. In most of the cases, flax was grown and processed in order to provide the family with clothing and needed objects for everyday life and rituals (tablecloths, towels, etc.). In the Soviet period, attempts at industrial production of linen were often undertaken in the compact residential areas of the Belorussians.

Fairly persistent traditions of applied arts survived in many places where the descendants of the Belorussian settlers lived. These traditions originated in the places of departure of their ancestors. First of all, they included the ornamentation motifs of embroidery on towels, shirts, and sarafans. Among the first generations of migrants, many women used to wear *andaraks* – woolen skirts of plaid fabric, which were once common in Belorussia.

Among the most consistent markers of traditional Belorussian culture in Siberia were specific recipes and methods of cooking. Among the national dishes, almost all informants mentioned *draniki* or potato pancakes. Potatoes have always played a central role in the Belorussian diet. Pork dishes, including salt pork, *salo*, were the most common among animal foods. The descendants of migrants from the Minsk and Vitebsk Guberniyas mentioned the dish called *koma*, which consisted of balls of grated potatoes stuffed with *salo* or pork and cooked in boiling water or baked in the oven. The migrants from different regions of Belorussia had a number of similar dishes which had different names and differed in recipe.

For many representatives of the first generations of the Belorussian migrants, their native language was one of the key markers of ethnic and cultural identity. The later generations which were born in Siberia, began to lose the purity of the language, gradually transforming their everyday speech into a particular Russian-Belorussian dialect. It may be partly compared with the phenomenon of "trasyanka" – the dialect that was common in some rural areas of Belorussia. This dialect was dominated by Russian vocabulary, pronounced in accordance with the lexical and phonetic rules of the Belorussian language.

Currently, most of the descendants of the Belorussian migrants have not preserved distinct dialect differences from the Siberian Old Settlers. However, some elements of the "Belorussian dialect" can be found in villages among the older generations as well as a number of nouns, borrowed from the Belorussian language, most of which are of particular importance in everyday life (for example, they say *tsibulya* instead of *luk* (onions) and *bulba* instead of *kartoshka* (potatoes), etc.).

The informants most often mention such holidays as Kupala, St. George's Day, or *Dzyady* as special calendar feastdays of the Belorussians. Over time, many of them lost the greater part of their original sacred context. Thus, some young descendants of the Belorussian migrants in the Tyumen and Omsk Provinces, in everyday language called the feast of Kupala, "the Bonfire." According to them, the feast was limited to evening meetings in nature around a bonfire as well as cooking food and singing. Such simplification is also typical for the descriptions of the Feast of *Dzyady*. Currently, the majority of Belorussian families which celebrate this feast, limit it to simple remembrance of ancestors, excluding the ritual actions inherent in its original context.

In a time of declining folk traditions and calendar ritual activities among the descendants of the Belorussian migrants living in Siberia, we can see the process of artificial revival of folk feasts, which began in the 1990s among ethnic cultural associations, which formed in many of the areas of compact residence of the Belorussians in the Russian Federation. The reconstructions of folk feasts became common as a result of the activities of such organizations. Thus, in the village of Desyatovo in the Ishim Region of the Tyumen Province, which no longer has bearers of the traditional Belorussian culture, the Bagach Feast, celebrated at the end of the harvest season, is recreated every year by the efforts of the ethnic and cultural society, "Belarus." Modern reconstructions of such Belorussian feasts and rituals as Gramnitsy, Radstvo, Gukanie of the Spring, Kupala, St. George's Day, Dzyady, etc. are conducted in many regions of Western Siberia. Thanks to the penetration of media and the Internet in the life of rural settlements, as well as trips of some of the Siberian dwellers to the land of their ancestors, such celebrations often take place in accordance with the models that take place in the territory of the modern Republic of Belarus. However, as a rule, such attempts reproduce only external, estheticized aspects of folk feasts, devoid of their original sacred, cultural, or economic context.

"The Candle" ritual

The devotion to the icon, "the Candle" and the ritual of its transfer, with the same name, in the Osinovka village of the Vikulovsky District of Tyumen Province is an interesting example of the original tradition of the Belorussian migrants, passed down from generation to generation, which has not lost its original value and

meaning. According to the legend, the icon of Christ's Resurrection, which is honored in the village, and which the local residents call "the Candle," was brought to Siberia by the first settlers from the Mogilev Guberniya. It was considered the guardian of the dwellers of Osinovka. However, until now there is no reliable information as to whether the icon was actually brought from Belorussia or appeared already in Siberia. According to the hypothesis put forward by V.N. Verenkova, the head of the Folk Museum of the village of Ermaki, the village next to Osinovka, the icon was originally located in the church of St. Nicholas in Ermaki. After the church was destroyed in 1930s, the icon was kept in the houses of local residents in accordance with the tradition that existed in the Mogilev Guberniya and which was still remembered by the migrants. In time, a special wooden case was made for the icon of Christ's Resurrection, where a number of other icons honored in the village were put (the icons of St. Nicholas, "the Burning Bush," etc.). The iconostasis is decorated with artificial flowers, foil, and folk embroidery (Fig. 1).

According to the tradition that exists in Osinovka, on the Feast of Nativity the icon of "the Candle" is brought from one house to another, where it stays for one year. Usually, the houses of the oldest and the most respected residents of the village are chosen for keeping the icon. On the morning of January 7th, the local people and guests would gather in the house where "the Candle" was kept for the past year. Each person would venerate the icon and light a candle next to it. It was also customary to make monetary donations which remained in the possession of the hosts. According to the recollections of the old residents, the ritual transfer of the icon often was conducted without a priest, but the local residents who knew prayers, read the prayers in front of the icon. This is explained by the absence of a church in the village and the semi-forbidden status of the ritual in the Soviet era. In recent years, a priest from a neighboring village is invited to the house where the icon will be transferred from. He conducts the service and gives a sermon. The road for the procession with the icon is in advance covered with straw. The residents of Osinovka and the guests line up in a row on the road and get on their knees. The icon is carried over them (Fig. 2), which is considered a kind of blessing for the coming year. When the icon is brought to the new house, it is put in a place of honor – in the red corner of the house. According to the custom, the doors of the house which receives the icon should always be open to all who come to venerate the icon. The hosts prepare a Christmas dinner for the guests, and people often sing songs during the feast. Everything connected with "the Candle" is considered to have miraculous properties. Many people take home the straw which covered the road during the transfer of the icon and keep it, believing that it has healing properties.



Fig. 1. "The Candle" icon (Resurrection of Christ).



Fig. 2. The ritual of transferring "the Candle" icon (Osinovka village, Vikulovsky Region, Tyumen Province).

Some people believe that candle stubs which remained near the icon also have healing properties.

According to the old residents, the tradition of transferring "the Candle" has never been interrupted, despite the frequent persecutions of the ritual during the Soviet era. We should try to compare the features of the ritual as it is conducted by the descendants of the migrants from Belorussia with the descriptions of a similar ritual in their ancestors' places of departure.

A related tradition of keeping the Communal Candle (called "Bratchina" or "Kanun") for a year in one of the houses and its subsequent transfer to another house during the most revered feast of the local church of the village was widespread in the western provinces of Russia and in the Russian North; later this tradition reached Siberia. The Communal Candle was enlarged every year and sometimes reached extremely large sizes. Often the most revered icons, usually owned by the whole community, were also kept and transferred from house to house along with the candle. After the prayer service and the transfer of the candle, the villagers organized a feast for the purpose of commemorating a revered saint. In this case, the center of the ritual, as a rule, was not an icon, but the candle. A different situation existed in Mogilev Guberniya which was the native place of the settlers who founded the village of Osinovka. In his studies, G.I. Lopatin noted that in some villages of the Mogilev region, icons revered by all the dwellers were called "Candles" in addition to the Communal Candles, and in East Polesie the whole ritual was called "the Candle." "The Candle" was transferred on the feast day of the saint to whom it was dedicated. On the basis of G.I. Lopatin's descriptions of the ritual in the places from where the Belorussian migrants departed, we can speak about its almost intact and authentic preservation in Siberia (Lopatin, 2008).

The earliest extant information of the ritual of "the Candle" in Mogilev Guberniya is dated to the second half of the 19th century (Zhudro, 1893; Dobrovolsky, 1900). However, it is more likely that the ritual goes back to the pre-Christian history of the Eastern Slavs. This is confirmed by studies in which scholars identify the remnants of the ancient worship of the hearth, of ancestors, etc. (Lopatin, 2008). According to eye witnesses, during the Soviet era (especially in the 1920s-1930s) the ritual of "the Candle" remained fairly stable in Belorussia. As in Osinovka, the icons saved from the destroyed churches became the property of the village community and were transferred from house to house. It can be assumed that these historical circumstances in some cases contributed to the shift in the emphasis of the meaning that the ritual used to have. If earlier in most cases the Communal Candle was the organizing object of the ritual, now more and more often the organizing object was represented by the icon of the revered saint, saved by the community.

It is noteworthy that in such a case, in the absence of a church in the village, the house where the icon is kept becomes a kind of temporary sacred center for the settlement. As we noted above, the doors of such a house are always open for those who want to pray in front of the icon and venerate it. A visiting priest can perform a service in the house and give a sermon. Local residents have a special reverence for the house where the icon is kept, and for the family that lives in the house. This reverence is often accompanied by donations of money

and food. Every family tries to be worthy of receiving the holy object in their house. According to the reports, "the Candles" were not given to drunkards and murderers. One can conclude that the ritual of "the Candle," brought by the Belorussians to Siberia, performed an important function of saving the unity of the rural community, even in the atheistic era of the Soviet regime.

Conclusions

Having summarized the field materials from expeditions to the areas of compact residence of the Belorussians in Western Siberia, we can conclude that the necessary condition for reproducing their traditional culture in a new place was the realization that the Belorussian settlers constituted a community held together by their culture, having a marked difference from the culture of the ethnic environment in which they happened to live in Siberia. This model of preservation of ethnic and cultural identity was only possible in fairly isolated rural settlements, originally founded by the Belorussian migrants, or in villages with mixed populations, where the Belorussians formed a separate community of compatriots. In urban areas or villages where the proportion of migrants from Belorussia was insignificant, as a rule, they were quickly assimilated and dissolved in a related ethnic and cultural environment.

Speaking about the current social and cultural situation, it should be emphasized that to varying degrees all of the descendants of the Belorussian migrants have undergone the process of economic and cultural integration in their hosting regional communities. However, in many settlements founded by the Belorussians, we can still find unique elements of material and spiritual culture, expressed in the principles of household management, architectural features and traditions of applied arts, as well as calendar rituals and folklore. The main condition for their continued existence is the preservation of ethnic and cultural self-identity. Today, it manifests several contradictory trends. On the one hand, the self-identity archetypes of the descendants of Belorussian migrants retain the elements of otherness, expressed through the opposition to the culture and way of life of the Old Settlers' (Chaldons and Old Believers) environment. On the other hand, we can see the increasing assimilation processes which reinforce the tendencies, common to the modern Russian village, associated with the outflow of young people, the destruction of cultural continuity of generations, and the extinction of many traditional forms of household management, which once played an important role in the life of these local communities.

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