The Ambiguities of Russification

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Reaction

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In the 1970s, when I began studying tsarist nationalities policy, there existed only a few reliable scholarly works concerning these problems. Soviet historiography emphasized the harmonious relations between the Russian state and non-Russian ethnic groups ("the friendship of peoples"), and the nationalities question was virtually taboo. So the delicate topic of Russia's relations with the Poles, Lithuanians, and Belarusians was avoided not only by most historians in the Soviet republics of Belorussia and Lithuania but also in communist Poland. Meanwhile, the interwar national historiographies of Poland and Lithuania, which survived among émigré scholars, were committed to the notion that a coherent and systematic Russification of the non-Russians had been undertaken in the tsarist empire. "Western" specialists on Russian history widely followed this pattern, although there were exceptions.[1] The first comprehensive, modern monographs devoted to tsarist nationalities policies in the western borderlands—the two volumes edited and partially written by Edward C. Thaden—were published only in the early 1980s. Thaden opposed the view that there had been a systematic, long-term Russification policy and distinguished between two kinds of Russification, administrative and cultural: the former was more durable and important and dated from the reign of Catherine II; while the latter was not systematic, covered only parts of the empire, and was undertaken after 1830 and especially after 1863.[2] Following

[1] For exceptions, see Georg von Rauch, *Russland: Staatliche Einheit und nationale Vielfalt. Föderalistische Kräfte und Ideen in der russischen Geschichte* (Munich: Isar, 1953); Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire, 1801–1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967); Marc Raeff, "Patterns of Russian Imperial Policy toward the Nationalities," in *Soviet Nationality Problems*, ed. Edward Allworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 22–42; and S. Frederick Starr, "Tsarist Government: The Imperial Dimension," in *Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices*, ed. Jeremy R. Azrael (New York: Praeger, 1978), 3–38.

[2] Edward C. Thaden, *Russia's Western Borderlands, 1710–1870*, with the collaboration of Marianna Forster Thaden (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Thaden, ed., *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855–1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); and

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this interpretation, I have tried to make some generalizations concerning tsarist nationalities policies.[3]

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the historiographical situation changed dramatically: the taboos imposed on Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian scholars disappeared; and hitherto closed archives were opened. Whereas many older historians now adopted the national paradigm, a younger generation of scholars made excellent use of the new opportunities and began to publish in-depth studies of the nationalities policies in the western regions of the empire. Today there exists an international network of specialists from Poland, Russia, Lithuania, the United States, and Western Europe who have all been working in the archives, have excellent language skills, and are engaged in a fascinating international discussion about the nature, aims, and implementation of Russification during the 1860s and the 1870s. The authors of the two articles presented in this issue of *Kritika*—one from Lithuania, the other from Russia—are active participants in this discourse. Other discussants whose works are frequently quoted in the articles are Henryk Głębocki and Witold Rodkiewicz (Poland), Leonid Gorizontov and Aleksei Miller (Russia), Theodore R. Weeks (United States), Daniel Beauvois (France), and Andreas Renner (Germany).[4]

The articles by Staliūnas and Dolbilov treat the Russification policy in the Northwest region during the 1860s as it was conceived, formulated, and implemented by the authorities, especially the regional Russian bureaucracy. Both make excellent use of Russian and Lithuanian archives and contemporary printed sources; and both apply the modern methodological approaches of discourse analysis and (especially in Dolbilov's case) the concepts of representation, symbols, and mythmaking. They share the general assumption that there was no coherent, systematic Russification policy in the sense of cultural and linguistic

Thaden, "Russification in Tsarist Russia," in *Modern Encyclopedia of Soviet and Russian History*, vol. 32 (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1983), 205–12.

[3] Andreas Kappeler, *Rußland als Vielvölkerreich: Entstehung, Geschichte, Zerfall* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1992, 3rd ed. 2001); translated as *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*, trans. Alfred Clayton (Harlow, UK: Longman-Pearson, 2001).

[4] To cite only a few monographs (and not the many articles published in, among others, *Kritika* and *Ab Imperio*): Daniel Beauvois, *La bataille de la terre en Ukraine, 1863–1914: Les polonais et les conflits socio-ethniques* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1993); Theodore R. Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996); Witold Rodkiewicz, *Russian Nationality Policy in the Western Provinces of the Empire (1863–1905)* (Lublin: Scientific Society of Lublin, 1998); Leonid Efremovich Gorizontov, *Paradoksy imperskoi politiki: Poliaki v Rossii i russkie v Pol'she* (Moscow: Indrik, 1999); Aleksei Miller, *"Ukrainskii vopros" v politike vlastei i russkom obshchestvennom mnenii (vtoraia polovina XIX v.)* (St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 2000); Andreas Renner, *Russischer Nationalismus und Öffentlichkeit im Zarenreich, 1855–1875* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2000); and Henryk Głębocki, *Fatalna sprawa: Kwestia polska w rosyjskiej myśli politycznej, 1856–1866* (Cracow: ARCANA, 2000). Books in Lithuanian (e.g., the works of Vytautas Merkys quoted in both articles) are not accessible to me.

assimilation and that the picture is very complex. The meaning of the crucial terms "Russification," "Pole," or "Russian" and the relative importance of different markers of nationality (language, alphabet, religion, class/estate) therefore had many variants. This diversity is aptly illustrated by well-chosen, contradictory quotations from the sources; however, the quotations sometimes appear to have been selected arbitrarily and at random, creating the impression that any argument can be supported with evidence from the sources.

In both articles, the numerous contradictions within Russian nationalities policy are well elaborated. Thus, on one hand, tsarist officials postulated that Belarusian peasants were genuine Russians, while on the other they believed these same peasants were menaced by Polonization and had to be liberated from strong Polish influence. There are contradictions and inconsistencies between the promotion of Orthodoxy and of the Russian language as the two main markers of Russian national identity. This question is treated extensively in the section of Dolbilov's article that discusses the attempts to introduce the Russian language into Catholic supplementary services; this complements Theodore Weeks's recent contribution to *Kritika*.[5] Staliūnas rightly argues that in general, religious allegiance was more important than language. Religious conversion was an official act, whereas linguistic assimilation was a long process and difficult to measure. People can be, and often were, multilingual, but they can and could (at least officially) profess only one religion. Nevertheless, both authors agree that there was no systematic policy of religious conversion in this period.

Other contradictions abound. Most bureaucrats advocated support for Orthodoxy and the Russian language, but they distrusted autonomous initiatives by Russian society (e.g., the Orthodox brotherhoods) that pursued the same aims but were not under their control. Sometimes, officials in the borderlands sided with the peasant peoples in their grievances against the Poles, whereas the imperial center opposed supporting primitive peasant cultures. There were also disparities between different agencies of the Russian government and between particular officials or between officials and publicists. Both authors agree that the tsarist bureaucracy did not attempt to resolve or reconcile these manifest contradictions.

How can we explain these numerous inconsistencies? Both authors rightly mention the fundamental contradiction between the traditional imperial ideology based on dynastic loyalty and estate, on one hand, and modern nationalism, on the other. Tsarist policies toward the non-Russian borderlands were based on the principle of cooperation with loyal native elites, whose privileges were confirmed and who were usually co-opted into the imperial nobility to the extent that they corresponded to the pattern of the Russian landowning upper class. In return, they had to maintain law and order in the borderlands and serve the tsar in the army and bureaucracy. Thus, not only the Baltic Germans

[5] Theodore R. Weeks, "Religion and Russification: Russian Language in the Catholic Churches of the 'Northwest Provinces' after 1863," *Kritika* 2, 1 (2001): 87–110.

and the Swedish-speaking Finns but also the upper strata of the Polish nobles were co-opted into the Russian nobility. With the Polish rebellions of 1830 and especially 1863, the traditional pattern of cooperation proved for the first time to be a failure. From the official viewpoint, the Polish nobles had broken their oath of loyalty to the tsar and were now considered traitors. Therefore, the tsarist government had to look for new methods and instruments to integrate and stabilize the western borderlands that had been dominated by the Polish nobility for centuries. In the 1860s, when the traditional method of cooperating with the Polish nobility failed, the Great Reforms of Alexander II pursued the aim of modernizing, systematizing, and homogenizing the traditionally diverse social and administrative order of the empire. This implied the intensification of administrative Russification. Simultaneously, in the growing public space, modern Russian nationalism was emerging and beginning to advocate the unity of the imperial or civic nation and the ethnic Russian nation. This new ideology, propagated during the 1860s mainly by Mikhail Katkov, weakened the old pillars of the empire—political loyalty to the autocrat and reliance on the elites regardless of their language and religion. Although the tsarist authorities were suspicious of modern nationalism, which was connected with the growth of an autonomous society and the spread of democracy, the new concept of a Russian ethno-political nation began to influence their policies. Owing to the growing emphasis on ethnic issues, loyalty was increasingly identified with ethnicity rather than social status. Poles—and later Germans, Jews, and other nationalities—were regarded more and more often as "enemy nations." These new currents did not, however, completely supersede the traditional imperial policy. Consequently, tsarist nationalities policy remained inconsistent and contradictory until the end of the Russian empire.[6]

Staliūnas and Dolbilov pay attention to the ambivalent and polysemantic meaning of the term "Russification" and the ethnonyms "Russian" (*rossiiskii/russkii*), "Belarusian," "Pole," and "Lithuanian." They enlarge our knowledge about the different uses of these terms, a question neglected by earlier scholarship. We therefore have to be very careful in reading and interpreting these terms, since they can have different (linguistic, religious, social, political, administrative) meanings according to the historical context and different sources. Staliūnas convincingly argues that for most Russian bureaucrats, the term "Pole" had a social and religious rather than an ethnic sense. The term "Lithuanian" could have a linguistic, social, and regional meaning and was

[6] Charles Steinwedel, "To Make a Difference: The Category of Ethnicity in Late Imperial Russian Politics, 1861–1917," in *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices*, ed. David L. Hoffmann and Yanni Kotsonis (Houndmills and New York: Macmillan/St. Martin's, 2000), 67–86; and Andreas Kappeler, "Mazepintsy, Malorossy, Khokhly: Ukrainians in the Ethnic Hierarchy of the Russian Empire," in *Culture, Nation, and Identity: The Ukrainian–Russian Encounter (1600–1945)*, ed. Andreas Kappeler et al. (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2003), 162–81.

used interchangeably with the term "Zhemaitian" (*Zhmud´*), which in the census of 1897 was considered to be a separate language.[7] This research into *Begriffsgeschichte* should be continued and expanded to other contradictory terms such as nation (*natsiia*), nationality (*narodnost´/natsional´nost´*), people (*narod*), tribe (*plemia*), borderland (*okraina*), inner provinces (*vnutrennie gubernii*), colony/colonial, empire/imperial, Ukrainian, Little Russian, South Russian, West Russian, Jew (*zhid/evrei*), Tatar, Sart, baptized (*staro-/novokreshcheny*), allogenes (*inorodtsy*), and indigenes (*tuzemtsy*).[8] Such research could result in a dictionary of the Russian empire as a useful tool for historical studies.

Among the Russifying measures of the 1860s, the ban on the Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Lithuanian languages (the latter only in Latin letters) is usually mentioned in the general literature. Whereas the Ukrainian case has been analyzed effectively in the recent book by Aleksei Miller,[9] and the existence of a ban on Belarusian has recently been convincingly disproved by Staliūnas,[10] the Lithuanian case is treated in the articles by Staliūnas and Dolbilov. Through a careful reading of the archival sources, they confirm Theodore Weeks's view that the tsarist bureaucracy in this respect did not have assimilatory goals but rather aimed at defending Lithuanians against Polish influences.[11] Whereas Staliūnas follows the traditional view that Governor-General Mikhail Murav´ev in 1864–65 gave the order that prohibited the use of the Lithuanian language in Latin letters, Dolbilov argues convincingly that there is no archival evidence of such an order and that the conservative Murav´ev (the "hangman of Wilno") was more reluctant than the liberal Nikolai Miliutin, whose statement that "Russian writing will finish what Russians began with the sword" is quoted by both authors. Only in September 1865 did the new governor-general, von Kaufman, issue a circular banning Lithuanian books in Latin letters, but in the following years the issue continued to be debated among tsarist officials. These wavering attitudes may reflect the fact that Petersburg paid little attention

[7] Henning Bauer, Andreas Kappeler, and Brigitte Roth, eds., *Die Nationalitäten des Russischen Reiches in der Volkszählung von 1897*, vol. A (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1991), 178–80; and Theodore R. Weeks, "Russification and the Lithuanians, 1863–1905," *Slavic Review* 60, 1 (2001): 96–114.

[8] Contributions to terminology include Gorizontov, *Paradoksy imperskoi politiki*; John W. Slocum, "Who, and When, Were the *Inorodtsy*? The Evolution of the Category of 'Aliens' in Imperial Russia," *Russian Review* 57, 2 (1998): 173–90; Darius Staliūnas, "'The Pole' in the Policy of the Russian Government: Semantics and Praxis in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Lithuanian Historical Studies*, no. 5 (2000): 45–67; Steinwedel, "To Make a Difference"; Theodore R. Weeks, "Defining 'Us' and 'Them': Poles and Russians in the 'Western Provinces,' 1863–1914," *Slavic Review* 53, 1 (1994): 26–40.

[9] Miller, *"Ukrainskii vopros"*.

[10] Darius Staliūnas, "Granitsy v pogranich´e: Belorusy i etnolingvisticheskaia politika Rossiiskoi imperii na Zapadnykh okrainakh v period Velikikh Reform," *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2003): 261–92.

[11] Weeks, "Russification and the Lithuanians," 110–11.

to the Lithuanian "peasant nation" as an ethnic group. Staliūnas points out that some Lithuanian intellectuals reacted favorably to the prohibition of the Lithuanian language in Latin letters. In this early phase of its development, it was more important for the Lithuanian national identity to set itself apart from the socially and culturally dominant Catholic Poles than from Russians and the tsarist state.

This argument can help explain the different historiographical schools that exist in the study of Russification. Staliūnas distinguishes between two approaches: the view that tsarist policy aimed at cultural assimilation, which predominates among scholars from Eastern and Central Europe, and the revisionist school in Russian and Western historiography. I would suggest that there are three approaches, depending on the main interests of the actors of the time. The Polish elite experienced harsh linguistic Russification and religious discrimination; and most Polish historians adopt this viewpoint and interpret tsarist nationalities policy from the 1830s on as systematic cultural Russification.[12] For Lithuanians, and partially for Belarusians and Ukrainians, Russification also meant de-Polonization, which in turn could facilitate their own social and national emancipation; as a result, Lithuanian historians interpret Russification as an ambiguous measure. Lastly, most Russian and Western scholars look at the issue from the point of view of the Russian bureaucrats and underline the relatively (in comparison with contemporary and later nation-states) reluctant and unsystematic nature of their policies. The different schools of interpretation largely reflect these different perspectives. There are, however, exceptions, such as Heinz-Dietrich Löwe and, recently, David Saunders who plead for a long-term design of cultural Russification since the reign of Catherine II.[13]

Different perspectives and the different regional, imperial, and international contexts of Russian policy thus have to be taken into account. Dolbilov's suggestion that we study these cases in comparison with the Great Reforms and with other regions of the empire is useful. There are parallels between the promotion of the Cyrillic alphabet and native languages against the Latin alphabet, the Polish language, and Catholicism in the west and against the Arabic alphabet, Turkic languages, and Islam (the so-called Il´minskii system) in the east of the empire. In general, we need comparative studies of conversion

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[12] Witold Rodkiewicz interprets tsarist nationalities policy as "bureaucratic nationalism" that aimed for the full linguistic Russification of non-Russians, and Henryk Głębocki argues that this nationalist policy started well before the Polish uprising of 1863 (Rodkiewicz, *Russian Nationality Policy*; Głębocki, *Fatalna sprawa*).

[13] Heinz Dietrich Löwe, "Nationalismus und Nationalitätenpolitik als Integrationsstrategie im zarischen Rußland," in *Die Russen: Ihr Nationalbewusstsein in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Andreas Kappeler (Cologne: Markus, 1990), 55–79; and David Saunders, "Regional Diversity in the Later Russian Empire," in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Sixth Series*, 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143–63.

policies in the west (not only among Catholics but also among Lutheran Balts) and in the east and south.[14] For a better understanding of Russian nationalities policy in the Northwest region, a comparison with the Baltic provinces would be useful; Baltic German and Polish elites, and Estonian or Latvian and Belarusian or Lithuanian peasants, played similar roles. One should also include tsarist Jewish policy in order to establish a general picture of "Russification" in the Northwest region. Concerning the international perspective, Dolbilov explores possible influences by Habsburg policies toward Ruthenians and Poles on Russian policies in the Northwest region. Other possible influences include the assimilationist policies of France, Germany, and Hungary and their effect on Russian public opinion and/or bureaucrats. Many questions thus remain open, ensuring that the discussion of Russification will go on.

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[14] See Sergei Viktorovich Rimskii, "Konfessional′naia politika Rossii v Zapadnom krae i Pribaltike XIX stoletiia," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 3 (1998): 25–44; and Robert P. Geraci and Michael Khodarkovsky, eds., *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).