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The Russian imperial practices of language and religion in the classroom in the Baltic provinces: the case of the Orthodox schools in Livland (1880-1914)

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Abstract

The article evaluates the impact of the Russian linguistic policy in the Baltic provinces focusing on the Orthodox schools in the nineteenth century. The article argues that, firstly, this policy had been limited because of the resistance of the local communities, lack of resources and an inadequate communication. Second, the reforms have contributed to emergence of bilingual cultural elites. Thirdly, the educational reforms had denigrated the role of religion and weakened the role of the clergy in education. The attempt of the state to communicate directly with its subjects using the Russian language was an energetic but unsuccessful attempt.

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1. Introduction

During the second half of the 1880s the Russian state had launched a series of reforms that aimed at the linguistic, administrative and cultural integration of the Baltic provinces and overcoming their so-called “special status”. The introduction of Russian as the teaching language was one of the most consistent among these reforms which have

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been called “Russification” by historians (Thaden et al., 1981). The Russian language replaced German in universities and city secondary schools but it also competed with local languages in the elementary schools. Since the majority of the elementary schools were either Lutheran or Orthodox, the educational language policy had affected also religious institutions and communities. Below we shall discuss how the language policy of the Russian Empire affected the Orthodox schools in the Baltic provinces. Even though this article agrees with scholars who point out the absence of a consistent language policy within tsarist Imperial administration (Pavlenko, 2011), we would like to analyse the specific endeavour to promote Russian as the language of teaching during the period between the reforms of Alexander III and the revolution of 1905. The article argues that the meaning of the linguistic Russification was an attempt of the Russian state at the reaching of the subject of the Empire directly without mediators (Orthodox and Lutheran clergy, Baltic German local nobility and administrators who spoke local languages and communicated between the Imperial centre and local population). As a result, the role of these traditional mediators have decreased but the role of the teachers, who were properly trained and certified, increased especially since the 1890s. The Orthodox schools tried to adapt to this change, but not always successfully. The article is based on the archival material from Estonian and Latvian historical archives and the Russian state historical archives, consisting of the reports of the Curator of Riga Teaching District, reports of the parish priests and the Bishops of Riga diocese and the central state policy documents, for example, the Ministry of Education.

2. The model of Orthodox popular education and the communication between the state and Imperial periphery

Before the “Russification” reforms the use of Russian in the classroom was limited: it was not used the medium of teaching, but as an additional subject or a skill. Therefore, the possibility for bilingualism and the development of cognitive processes in mother tongue was not obstructed by the imposition of the foreign language as the means of teaching.

By 1885 there were about 315 Orthodox schools in Livland, that primarily have educated children of Orthodox Latvian and Estonian peasants who converted to Orthodoxy from Lutheranism. This was almost a fifth of all schools in the region (19, 5%) and more than a quarter (26,5%) in the Estonian part of Livland (Ernits, 1973; Andresen, 2002). The Orthodox schools have implemented a model of popular education that had been practiced in the region by the Lutheran church, but yet was also similar to educational practices of Nikolai Ilminsky in Trans-Volga region. The Orthodox Catechism, liturgy, prayers and Sacred History have been taught through the means of the local languages. To achieve this liturgical and educational literature have been translated from Russian into Latvian, Estonian and Swedish (for some Swedish communities in Vormsi island that converted to Orthodoxy). At the same time, the Orthodox schools offered teaching of Russian, which the Lutheran schools could not provide. Since a large number of clergy had Russian background, the use of Russian in the classroom in the Orthodox schools was not too difficult to achieve.

During the 1860s the Orthodox church and the schools in the region have been promoted as the possible instruments of strengthening the Russian influence. In the situation when many Orthodox converts bid to return to Lutheranism, the government expressed concerns about the declining Russian influence in the region. In the 1870s several steps were made to strengthen the Orthodox schools. Orthodox parishes and schools received material support and a more organised administration and funding: a Council for the Orthodox elementary schools was presided by the Baltic Governor-General and included the Bishop of Riga, rector of the Riga Spiritual Seminary, the Curator of the Derpt Teaching District and director of Alexander Riga gymnasium. The Council was responsible for the distribution of the financial support to the schools which had been annually provided by the central government. In addition, the Ministry of Education had established the posts for three school inspectors in order to overview the academic life in the Orthodox schools. In support of the Russian educational influence, the central government opened the Teacher Seminaries in Riga (1870) and Tartu (1878).

Nevertheless, the support of the Orthodox education in the region had not meant to root out the local culture. Strengthening of the Russian influence was primarily understood as subverting the cultural and political influence of the Baltic German elites. Within the Orthodox schools the German influence was non-existent, therefore the Russian had always been taught as one of the central subjects. Yet, the main studies were carried out through the use of local languages, Estonian and Latvian. The Orthodox church had supported the teaching of the local languages: for this

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