German Language and Identity in Religious Communities of Crimea

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Abstract. The paper investigates aspects of German language usage in the ethnic community of Crimean Germans—members of Russian-speaking Evangelical-Lutheran church in Simferopol. The results of a field study conducted in August 2019 indicate that German language is used by members of the community mainly in the course of church ceremonies and home prayers.

Methods. Overt observation, questionnaires and interviews with community members were conducted. We have also managed to obtain recordings of church services and collected individual speech samples of the prayer "Our Father" in German.

The results. The predominance of women (82%) aged 50 to 87 and having mixed ethnic origin was revealed. Russian is the mother tongue of the vast majority. At the same time, 75% of the respondents understand German, 25% can speak German. All members of the community communicate only in Russian. 88% know the basic prayers and sing in German in the church.

1. Historical Background of Evangelical Lutheran Church in Crimea

The Germans came to Crimea in the early 19th century at the invitation of the Russian Empress Catherine II, who sought to settle empty territories after many wars and considered the Germans to be a society with high labor consciousness. And many from Wurttemberg, Baden, Nassau, Westphalia, Swabia, Alsace and Bavaria voluntarily followed the call, as they suffered from wars with France. In Novorossiya, they were exempted from military service and granted permission for freedom of faith and the right to their own culture, language and government [1].

They founded in the Crimea in the period from 1804 to 1810 eight "mother colonies": south of Simferopol Neizac (now Krasnogorskoye), Friedenthal (Kurortnoe) and Rosenthal (Aromatic); near the Old Crimea—Zurichthal (Golden Field) and Heilbrunn (Privetnoe); near Feodosia—Herzenberg (Pioneer); the German colony Sudak under the same name fortress and, finally, Kronental (Kolchugino) in 25 km to the west of Simferopol. These mother settlements formed most of the villages. In 1918 there were already 314 German villages. The Germans lived mainly as farmers of middle profit.

Most of the colonists have brought their Lutheran faith. The key role for the formation of Lutheran communities belonged to pastors and awakened "brothers" and preachers who gathered communities in the new settlements. In the new homeland, they built churches, pastoral and congregational houses and, of course, Lutheran schools where classes and services were held in German. If the parish covered several villages, the Sunday services were conducted by teachers, in full compliance with the motto: "Not a single Sunday without worship".

In the 19th century there was an attempt to unite the individual congregations in the Russian Empire into one common church. In 1832 the charter of the church "Law on Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia" was published, which was in force until 1924. The "Consistory" was founded as a church
governing body. The region, which was subject to one consistory, was divided by parishes. Crimea was one pastoral parish under the leadership of a senior pastor. The central Consistory was located in St. Petersburg. The king was the head of the church, and the Lutheran Church, as well as the Orthodox Church, received the status of the official church of the state.

At the beginning of the XX century Lutheran faith in the Crimea flourished with 168 Evangelical communities and 20,913 believers. However, soon afterwards, the October Revolution led not only to the separation of the church from the state, but also to the expropriation of churches, pastoral houses, school buildings and other premises. Also, the division of land, which ensured the material maintenance of priests and teachers, was abolished: in this way, the Evangelical Church was deprived of all its external resources. Although, as a rule, the premises could continue to be used, the congregations were now required to pay for the rent of the premises previously owned by them.

The Lutheran Church in Russia resembled a "martyr church": the goal of state policy since 1925 was to destroy the church. The priests were evicted, killed or exiled.

In 1937, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Already in 1930, the first forced evictions of independent German peasants from Crimea outside the Urals began, as they resisted the promotion of agricultural collectivization. In August and September 1941, under Stalin's order, about 50,000 Germans were deported from Crimea to Siberia, the Urals and Kazakhstan, as he feared their cooperation with the occupiers. At the end of the war, the last Germans were expelled from Crimea. With the expulsion of all Germans, church work fell into disrepair. Church, school and community homes were destroyed or used by the Soviet government for other purposes [2].

It was only during perestroika that an agreement was reached between Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and German Bundeskanzler G. Kohl that Russian Germans and their descendants could return to Germany or the Crimea. Many still did not return to Crimea, but went to Germany. First of all, mixed Russian-German families and many who were not Crimean Germans by origin returned to Crimea. They could have been from the Volga region, but now they have settled in Crimea. In 2001, about 2800 Crimean residents indicated their German nationality. Most of them were members of the German clubs Landsmannschaft or Wiedergeburt [3].

That's how congregations were formed again. Soon the communities in the Crimea became numerous. Currently, there are seven registered congregations in Crimea belonging to the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of the European part of Russia, the German Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Ukraine, the legal successor to the former Lutheran Church in the Russian Empire. At the same time, there are several free congregations that do not wish to adhere to the official church and are not spiritually led by officially ordained pastors [1,4,5].

The German Evangelical Lutheran Community of Simferopol has been functioning since 1992 and was formed mainly of ethnic Germans and Slavs interested in Protestantism and cultural ties with Germany. The number of parishioners and members of the community varied and was up to 100. Pastors from Germany were active in the community. There were German language courses, a Sunday school and a youth community. Since 2014, the trend is towards strengthening ties with the Germans in Russia.

2. Field Research in the German Evangelical Lutheran Church Community of Simferopol

The purpose of the field study, conducted in August 2019, was to identify main features of the German language usage and significant ethno-cultural markers among ethnic German communities in Crimea. The German Evangelical-Lutheran community of Simferopol was chosen as the target community because the religious activity of this community is connected with the use of sacred texts in German.

The main hypothesis of the study was that even if the German language ceased to function as a means of interpersonal communication of ethnic Germans in Crimea, it could continue to exist in
religious communities for a long time as a means of communicating with God and thus it persisted to
be present in the lives of believers, forming an important part of their identity.

Therefore, one of the main objectives of the study was to record the church service and to study how
often and how easily believers use the German language during group chants and prayers. In the course
of this task, 2 Sunday services were recorded by means of the overt observation method, 123 minutes
of the recordings were obtained, 7 individual interviews with recited prayer "Our Father" in German
were conducted and recorded.

At the same time eight people (72 percent of parishioners) including two community pastors filled in
a questionnaire, which included general socio-demographic data (gender, age, profession, education),
questions about the degree of knowledge of German and Russian and the nature of their use. In
addition, the questionnaire inquired data on the degree of ethnic kinship, ethnic identity, and identities
of family members of the respondents.

3. Results

The observation found that in August 2019 the number of congregation members attending Sunday
services ranged from 11 to 25. The largest number of people visited the church on the day of the
deportation. The event was commemorated on August 18, 1941. Also, as noted by the community
pastor Elsa Gerco, a largest number of parishioners attend church on holidays, especially on Christmas,
which is celebrated on December 25.

Socio-demographic data from observations and surveys show the predominance of women in the
community (82%). Community leadership and management are carried out by women pastors, and
women who are active members of the community's church life are also responsible for singing and
management. In the questionnaires, the range of the indicated dates of birth is within the limits of 1932-
1969, the age of more than 60% of the surveyed members of the community is older than 70, and the
youngest age is 50 years old.

The community members interviewed were of mixed ethnicity, although in general some members
of the community were not of German origin and had joined the community based on their religious
beliefs, or their children were married to Germans and lived in Germany. 75 percent had a German
ancestor from father or mother, and 25 percent had a German mother or father. The rest of the
respondents' relatives are Russians or Ukrainians. For 62 percent of the surveyed culture, religion and
mother tongue are major factors in determining the nationality, while 38 percent believe that the
nationality of the father or mother plays a major role in determining the nationality of the child in the
family. The average assessment of the importance of nationality for the respondent is 6 out of 10
points. 75 percent of the respondents consider themselves Germans because they feel close to the
traditions, culture and language of the German people and want to be part of and revive German
culture. 25 percent consider themselves more Russians or Ukrainians than Germans. The majority of
the respondents were baptized in Orthodoxy, 38% profess Orthodoxy and have not been confirmed.
National identity, according to the respondents, affects mainly the cultural and religious spheres of their
lives. The influence of nationality spreads to some respondents’ family life. Among the traditions,
those related to religious Lutheran holidays are the most observed.

The mother tongue of all but one respondent of pure German origin is Russian. At the same time, 75
percent of the respondents understand German, 25 percent (under 60 years of age) can speak German,
but prefer Russian when communicating with their peers. All respondents communicate only in
Russian in everyday life. 88 percent know the main prayers and sing in the church in German. All but
one respondent participating in the survey freely recited the prayer "Our Father" in German.
4. Conclusions

Modern ethnic Germans living in the Crimea, who are members of the German Evangelical-Lutheran church in Simferopol are of a predominantly mixed origin and combine the cultural code of the Russian, Ukrainian and German nations. The common historical past, religious festivals and cultural events unite the community and allow to preserve and restore the customs and traditions accepted in the German Lutheran communities.

The preservation of the German language is one of the main objectives of the community, which is revealed by functioning of the German language courses in the church until 2014, but the accompanying emigration does not contribute to the increase in the number of parishioners. In August 2019, the average number of people attending Sunday services was about 11, mostly women over 50. For most of them, German is the language of the main prayers and chorales, the language of their ancestors, whose traditions they strive to preserve and, if possible, pass on to their children and grandchildren. Thanks to the efforts of this community, the German language continues to function in the socio-cultural and religious space of Crimea.

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