

RELIGIOUS AND NATIONAL TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE IN ESTONIAN HISTORY

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If one can say that the phenomena of tolerance and intolerance have played an important role in certain historical events and longer processes, it should be stressed that these processes have in the first place affected the national character of certain people groups. This character in its own turn have made this or that event possible.

Discussing religious and national relationships in Baltic countries and more closely in Estonia the differences between the attitudes and feelings that came to light through the centuries should be noted.

In the course of historical events the circumstances have been such that the Estonians had to be in a position of defence since the first part of the 13-th century. They were forced to accept in some way a new religion coming from the west together with a new lifestyle, or perish. Later on this attitude of self-preservation made it possible for the nation to come through many wars and distresses which could in some other case sweep another nation away from the face of earth.

The first serious threats for Estonian national independance came from Russia in the 12-th century when Yaroslax Mudry tried to set up his permanent residence in present-day Tartu. In those times the Estonian war-craft and social structure were still on the level which enabled to drive the Russians out of the land. All these events can be characterized as rather obscure but it seems that here nothing was to do with any ideology.

The problem whether Russians had any serious intentions to christianize Estonia, has been discussed rather widely and the authorities have pointed out that most probably they had no such aim.

The problem of religion became far more complicated when the German conquest to the Baltic lands began at the end of the 12-th century. Speaking of those times its difficult to say whether there were any strong national feelings and whether any intolerance came from that. But it's certain that the coming conquerors were observed by the local pagans as people who had another god. The question was whose god or gods will win the fight.

As the pagans (the Estonians in our case) had to deal with quite a big number of supernatural creatures and spirits they were not so intolerant against one new among them – the christian God. But their attitude changed during the bloody fights against those who were defending that new God.

The main source for researching in the observation of the fight of Estonians against the German conquest is the Chronicle of Henry the Livonian, a priest in

Latvia, who was the contemporary of the events that took place on the eastern coast of the Baltic sea during the first decades of the 13-th century. Few nations have such a good source for their early history.

Speaking about national characters Henry the Livonian points out the good sides of the Latgals (in those times one can't yet speak of the Latvian nation). The Older Rhymed Chronicle from an unknown author characterizes Estonians as especially evil pagans but Henry the Livonian accepts their good qualities in fight.

From the descriptions of these chronicles one can see that the Estonians were not so obstinate in the relations with the new Christian god. An episode with a German priest serves as an example for that: it was to be decided whether the captured priest should be killed or not; a horse was taken and forced to go and the life of the priest depended on what leg the horse would step first. The horse took the leg that meant life and the priest wasn't executed.

During the conquest Estonians were baptized but in those places where they succeeded to regain their old independence for some time, people washed the baptizing off.

Perhaps Estonia would have in the course of times accepted Christianity in peaceful ways but as it was forced on with a sword, it brought along a pagan reaction. For example people started again to burn their dead instead of burying them. The bodies buried according to the Christian habits were dug out.

The idea of the possibility of peaceful acceptance of Christianity is supported by the fact that geographically the Estonian territory lies between the Christian East and West. The economic contacts were rather considerable and such a situation in which the pagan landpatch had to organize so many Christian relations couldn't last long.

To sum up the religious situation in Estonia during the centuries up till the Reformation one can say that although Christianity was forced on Estonians in quite a brutal way and many of those who came to introduce it had quite an infamous past, it became, perhaps, more intimate for Estonians than Lutheranism later. Many pagan-Catholic traditions have been carried on up till the 20-th century.

The old pagan tolerance in religious questions was applied towards Catholicism. As the pagan religion had to deal with a great number of supernatural beings, as mentioned already, it simply realted its understanding of the spirits with Catholic saints. They could bring them (and the church) offerings just as they had done for their pagan gods.

Perhaps the change in religious attitudes that was required for a the average people was not so big between paganism and Catholicism as it was later on between Catholicism and intolerant Lutheranism, which in Estonia had especially strict attitudes influenced by German correctness and Prussian order.

Speaking of national and religious tolerance and intolerance in early Estonian history the uprising against the German order that began in St. Georges Night in

1343 should be mentioned. The Younger Rhymed chronicle (it hasn't been preserved in its original form) that gives information of the mentioned events, stresses quite an intolerant attitude on the part of Estonians. Many historians consider it to be the last serious demonstration of the old Estonian spirit of liberty and desire for political independence, some others (Uku Maing) have taken it more as a Danish-German conflict. Perhaps here we have one case where the sources are so inadequate that the truth is hardly ever achievable.

New problems in religious and national relationships came up in Estonia during the 16-th century (actually the process took up the first part of the 17-th century, too) when the Reformation and The Livonian war completely changed the situation here and decided the position of Estonians and the ways of forming the Estonian national character, just as the German conquest had done it in the 13-th century.

It's quite difficult to say whether the majority of the local nation accepted the Reformation with goodwill or not. The Polish Jesuits who had the possibility to organize the counter-reformation during the short Polish rule in Southern Estonia after the Livonian war, remarked for example that Estonians were good Catholics and accepted their mission with eagerness. The feudal class in the country remained Catholic for many decades that followed the formal Reformation in 1525, and when they changed their religion, their serfs were considered to have changed theirs, too without having any possibility to demonstrate their religious feelings if they happened to have them.

Of course it would be wrong to say that the Reformation brought along none of the events in which some intolerance could be observed. In Tallinn and the second-biggest town Tartu some actions of iconoclasts took place but here the question rises whether these events should be looked upon as outbursts of religious feelings or simply details of social movement of the lower classes of the towns.

The Livonian war can be discussed from many view-points: political, economic etc. and from the religious and national perhaps in the last order. But speaking about the position of Estonians the problems of national character are not unimportant.

In the contradictions between Russians, Germans, Swedes and Poles none of the mentioned forces was troubled about the fate of the local nation and once again Estonians had the problem of preserving their existence. As they already had some experience of this, it perhaps made it possible for them not to perish. As Germans had directly shown their power in Estonia during many centuries already, it is not astonishing that Russians found some support from the local peasants at the beginning of the war. But later on when they had shown all their rudeness in devastating the land the attitude changed and the intolerance towards Russians grew. The Estonian peasants even organized some independent fighting-groups to protect their villages and homes that served none of the great powers fighting in their land.

One very outstanding source in dealing with The Livonian war and the pre-war period is The Livonian Chronicle of Balthasar Russow, written in the end of the 16-th century. The author was a strict Lutheran pastor and describes with great criticism the rites carried through according to the Catholic traditions mixed up with paganism. His attitude towards Russians is strongly negative and so many parts of his chronicle belonged to so-to-say prohibited literature during the post-war decades.

All in all the result of the war to the Estonian national character could be no other than the deepening of the attitude supporting self-preservation with every possible means. This perhaps in its own order helped during great devastations of the Northern war in 1700-1721.

The time of the Swedish rule in Estonian history that covers the gap between the Livonian and the Northern wars has been traditionally looked upon as a good time for Estonian nation. Perhaps Swedes are the only ones among the foreign rulers against whom Estonians have not experienced any considerable intolerance. They introduced many reforms positive for the peasants (the reduction of the manors for example); under their rule the peasant-schools began to flourish etc. One reason for the good attitude could be also that that they were not personally present in the country, except for some administrators. The local manor-owners remained mostly Germans, the devastating actions during the wars were carried out mostly by Russians and Poles and so the Swedish rule could be considered as rather progressive.

The Northern war brought the next rise of national intolerance.

The times of serious religious conflicts were over and the local powers in Estonia had to think of defending their national identity against Russians. Although the official power here was Swedish, the executive posts were mostly filled by Germans and all the ruling class was doubtlessly German. Here is not only the problem of preservation of the Estonian nation but also the problem of position and identity of the Baltic Germans. From now on they had to fight for their specific rights in The Russian Empire and this fight brought along national hatred from one part (Germans here considered themselves always to have been a connecting bridge for Russians between East and West) but also conformism.

Lutheranism became one means for the Baltic Germans to support their national identity and its strict attitudes reached also local nations, although in their character these attitudes didn't show themselves in such intolerant ways as by Germans.

Thus the idea of self-preservation began to prevail in the mind of Estonians due to many conflicts of the great powers in their land. This in its own turn cultivated tolerance which was for example in a large scale exhibited during the years of Estonian independence in 1918-40 when every considerable nationgroup had the possibility to obtain education in its mother-tongue etc. But from the other side, this tolerance perhaps brought an underestimation of Russian danger at the end of the thirties.

Besides the historical events the religious and national tolerance and intolerance have affected the habits of every-day life, language etc. (for example the word "saks" in Estonian with somewhat bad meaning is used for a person of higher position and is derived from the word that means German).

To speak about the influence of national and religious feelings on scientific research one should say that in Estonian history it has caused a situation in which many problems have been very slightly touched and others so-to-say overstudied.