

The Baltic Peoples in the Development of Virgin Lands in Kazakhstan: Cultural Relations and Standards / Deviations in Everyday Life (The 1950s–1960s)

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate the issues of “standards and deviations” in the everyday life of the Baltic peoples who came to Kazakhstan for the development of virgin and fallow lands in the 1950s and 1960s. The authors attempted to trace the history of the appearance of the Baltic peoples on the territory of Kazakhstan, as well as issues of “standards and deviations” in everyday life during the years of virgin lands development. The study focuses on the fact that assistance from the Baltic republics to virgin land Kazakhstan with human and material resources has become the norm of the Soviet everyday life. The state and party organs imperatively implemented the standards of contribution and “behaviour” of the Soviet republics in the implementation of the virgin project, shaping various positive/negative socio-cultural everyday practices. According to the authors, the Soviet leadership created “deviations” in the form of protest sentiments, inter-ethnic conflicts and discontent of national minorities on a wide range of political and socio-economic issues through ideological principles.

Keywords: History of Kazakhstan; Baltic peoples; development of virgin and fallow lands; everyday life.

Introduction

A special topic is the issues of labour education, which became the focus of attention of state and party bodies. In the view of the Soviet man-virgin land person, the help of the union republics with both human and material resources, mass inter-republican migrations were considered the norm of everyday life.

In the public mind, “work” was associated with socially useful work, the existence of which was considered a constitutional duty of a Soviet man. However, neither the presence of the dominant idea about the chosen right path to the communist society, nor the approved stereotypes, nor even the creation of strong farms in the virgin lands guaranteed society protection from the emergence of protest moods, which were perceived in it as deviations from the standards. The “standards/deviations” dichotomy gradually began to take on more distinct forms, and primarily in such a sphere of private life as social relations, material, and living conditions. It is therefore no coincidence that archival documents are replete with propaganda material about assemblies at various levels in which the normative judgements of the authorities clashed with social and everyday practices. And here it should be noted that in the Khrushchev era a new system of punishments was being formed, assigning an important role to public courts as a form of state struggle against “anomalous” phenomena. And this task was quite consonant with the attitudes of the Soviet leader, who believed that the public should take a responsible approach to this issue and engage in the “re-education” of citizens who committed an anti-social act.

Materials and Methods

The authors used a wide range of sources in the article. The main part of the documentary material was studied in Kazakhstani archives. Separate documents on interethnic conflicts were studied in the funds of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan (F. 708) and the Central Committee of the

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Leninist Communist Youth Union of Kazakhstan (F. 812) of the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Materials from the archives of the Pavlodar State Archive and the Centre for Documentation of Contemporary History of East Kazakhstan Oblast were used to analyse materials on the history of Stalinist repressions. In 1990, after the publication of the article “In the Name of Justice”, the Pavlodar archives began to receive information about the repressed, i.e., letters, memoirs, diary entries, applications with requests to find relatives who disappeared during those years, about burial sites, etc. (Ternik 1990). The documents of the unjustly repressed (the inventory contains information about 126 people) were described and deposited in the state custody. Among these files we found materials about the Baltic peoples who ended up on the territory of Kazakhstan. These materials are valuable because they contain personal collections of participants of those events: photographs, autobiographies, memoirs, certificates of rehabilitation, etc. The documents of the state archives of Kostanai and Pavlodar Oblast are of interest for separate subjects of the regional history of the Baltic diasporas.

For our analysis, we drew on materials from Russian archival holdings. Of interest are materials in the funds of the CPSU Central Committee (F.17) of the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History and in the funds of the Propaganda Department of the CPSU Central Committee (F.5) of the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI). These funds contain documents on the social and political history of Kazakhstan in the period which interests us. There were difficulties in the search for sources in the funds of the RGANI because of the fragmentary nature of the material contained, some of which has not been declassified.

The archival “virgin land” of the topic of our study, as well as the problem of the “partial declassification” of a wide range of documents, significantly complicated the process of comprehensive “immersion” into the problem of studying the history of the Baltic peoples in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, in our view, the studied materials have enabled us to advance our analysis of the history of the emergence and activity of the Baltic diasporas during the period under study, showing the specifics of the relationship between the “Balts”⁷ and the “lines of schism” that emerged in Soviet society. At the same time, we understand that the majority of Soviet documents of state and party bodies are of propaganda and publicity nature, the peoples’ virgin land life is painted in rainbow colours – from the series “Welcome to us, to Kazakhstan!” Therefore, for critical verification of archival documents, we used ego-document materials: personal memoirs, diary entries, photos, interviews and correspondence with “Baltic virgin lands prospectors”, with Baltic diasporas living in 1950s–1960s and living in contemporary Kazakhstan. Their contradictory value judgments about their past in Kazakhstan supplemented the materials we collected in the archives.

Discussion and Research Results

Labour and social relations in the virgin lands

The contradictory nature of the virgin land campaign quite naturally gave rise in the minds of a certain part of the virgin land people to new “norms” that relatively justify, due to material reasons, “slackness and dependency”. For example, in 1961, a construction and installation train were sent to the virgin lands, formed by the government of the Latvian SSR. The train was assigned a program of construction and installation works in the amount of 400 thousand roubles. Given that the amount charged was quite large, government agencies were instructed to carefully approach the selection of personnel and send concrete workers, plasterers, fitters, etc. to the virgin lands. However, according to the archives, there were significant deficiencies in the train’s equipment. Let’s refer to an excerpt from the document: “The head of the construction train was chosen unsuccessfully. He is rude to the workers, not showing any concern for the workers, not proactive, as a result of which there were serious incidents between him and the workers”. The construction train included workers from the Rigastroy trust, the Daugavpils general construction trust, Latpotrebsoyuz, and others. As the manager of the Petropavlovsk-Elevatorstroy trust E. Stratanovich noted

⁷ We intentionally use the word “Balts” in inverted commas, as for the peoples of the Baltic States this notion has more of a negative meaning. Culturally, ethnically and religiously, Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians have different national identities. The term emerged during the Sovietisation of these territories and is associated by the Baltic peoples with the Soviet occupation. At the same time, the adjective “Baltic”, e.g. Baltic peoples, does not have a negative meaning and is therefore used in the article.

in an information note: “The composition of the train is diverse and, moreover, about 20% of people are random, as a result of which two conflicting directions have been created within the team”. Below he gave a rather detailed description of the professional composition of the construction train. Part of the workers, having met with construction conditions that were unusual for them, arbitrarily left back, thereby introducing disorganization into the ranks of the “doubting” virgin land people. For example, from the composition of the construction train that arrived from the Republic of Lithuania in 1961, 32 “workers who accidentally got to them” left without permission, 20 people, by decision of the general meeting of the train, were sent back for drunkenness and absenteeism. Two people were prosecuted for hooliganism (State Archive of the city of Astana (SA of the city of Astana). F. 136. Inv. 7. F. 109. Sh. 12).

In the Komsomol publications, questions were often raised about “the unworthy” behaviour of young people in the virgin lands, pursuing selfish goals. As a narrative of those years, a discourse is formed that tells about two images of a Soviet person. The first is a positive hero, a hard worker, a leader in production, who is guaranteed by the state a set of quite decent material and household benefits (material assistance, an apartment, a land plot, etc.) for hard work. This image can be called standard, even standardized, since Soviet reality levelled the material differences between people. The second is an “anomaly” of Soviet reality – “a parasite”, “an egocentric” individualist who neglects the rules of collective living, the social basis for the development of the so-called protest subculture of everyday life.

So, the head of the Komsomol brigade E. Stratanovich noted that “the first thing is honest workers who really went to help the virgin lands, to show the culture of production. The second is people, and their 45–50 people arrived for big roubles and, not wanting to work, took up drinking, hooliganism and even theft. For example, Muller and Kucherov, from the Rezekne city executive committee, were arrested by the authorities and sentenced to 3 to 5 years. The workers of the Rezenkne City Executive Committee Belodis, Olisov, Ganus V. D., Slakhov O. A. systematically drank and ran away from production. Kersky and Rakov also escaped from the Tselissky construction department. Markuz from the Riga city executive committee was sent for systematic violations of labor discipline, Dombrovsky M. S., Yablonsky I. A., Paliy E. P., Freiberg, Berzins, Alberg, Zemturs, workers of the Letpotsoyuz fled. Melkin A. N., Melkin M. N., Berzins from the Krustpilsky District Executive Committee, and others were expelled for unauthorized abandonment of the construction train” (SA of the city of Astana. F. 136. Inv. 7. F. 108. Sh. 44). Here is another example. Giving, in general, a positive characterization of his comrades, the installer of the Latvian raw material base G. Danilevsky wrote in his diary: “This morning Pimenov refused to go to repair the combine. He said that he would already be paid twelve roubles per day. And digging in the mud is not his business, the state farm itself should have taken care of this. It seems that the guy is rotten, even though he wears a Komsomol badge” (SA of the city of Astana. F. 136. Inv. 7. F. 110. Sh. 7).

If some virgin lands-machine operators declared: “Let them give us new cars, but we won’t accept old ones of any brands and we won’t start work until we achieve our goal, we get new cars and then we’ll see who will be in the cold either we, or those who tacitly accept all junk” (GASKO. F. 1473. Inv. 1. F. 708. Sh. 96). Others, in their dissatisfaction, went even further, sending letters directly to the Central Committee of the party. Thus, Deputy Chief Accountant of the Certification Department A. G. Bridlin (a native of Riga), while on a business trip in the Kaibagar district of the Kustanai Oblast, got into a snowstorm and got lost. In his letter to N. S. Khrushchev he complained that there were no searchlights in settlements, and that vodka, plates, and spoons could not be found in stores. He recommended putting these questions before the Government of the Republic (State Archive of Akmola Oblast (SAAO). F. 1. Inv. 1. F. 2389. Sh. 1).

Among the virgin land workers there were also those who did not believe in the results of the development of the virgin lands, felt disappointed in the Party and openly declared their “unconventional” beliefs. Their dislike of the virgin orders was expressed in numerous reports by “troublemakers” of violations and disturbances on the “virgin lands”: “There are many such people among this crowd, who are snooping around and whispering about how terrible it is on the virgin land, that almost everyone who comes is killed. The weak in spirit, intimidated by such whispers for their precious life, if they have money, they turn back, without even looking at the virgin land” (State Archive of Kostanai Oblast (SAKO). F. 72-P. Inve. 20. F. 69. Sh. 5). Among those who left “without even looking at the virgin land” were “...in a carriage of 30 people there were 12 people returning to Tallinn...” (ibid.). In the personal file of Ionas Adolfovich Verkitis, CPSU

candidate, there is an extract from the minutes of an open party meeting of the primary organization of the iron and concrete factory, which notes that “Verkitis has not paid party dues for 9 months. As a brigadier he is respected, but as a party candidate he has grossly violated the party statute by concealing his party affiliation” (SAAO. F. 1. Inv. 1. F. 2542. Sh. 4). It is difficult to draw a conclusion from the scanty data in the archive file. It is most likely that the exclusion from the party candidates is related to I. Verkitis’s ideological beliefs, because, as the secretary of the party organization (name unintelligible) wrote: “When talking to me about his reinstatement as a candidate, he expressed his opinion that there was no point in going and explaining himself to the City Committee. I agree with the decision of the primary party organisation on his exclusion from the party candidates” (ibid.). It can be said that the process of discontent and rejection of the virgin land order and principles was permanent, but mostly latent.

Concern for the moral image of the virgin land person led to the fact that, at the “urgent requests of the workers”, a whole system of punishments was applied to violators, up to and including exclusion from the ranks of the party and the Komsomol, with all the ensuing consequences. Thus, care grew into control of a repressive nature, forming the standard image of the “builder of communism”, while downplaying ethnic differences between peoples. In a closed society, the individual becomes more sensitive and less rational. Surviving in the crowd, he adjusts his behaviour to others, to the standards set by someone else. By silencing a person’s personal impulses, the task of a closed society is to erase their uniqueness. This practice led to the fact that those “Albanians” who, for various reasons, did not conform to Soviet “standards” had to find ways and means to “dissolve” in the local socio-cultural environment, often pushing their national identity into the background. Thus, the authors of the article paid attention to the fact that in archival documents, when studying the personal files of the virgin lands’ workers, under the Russian surnames “Ivanov”, “Petrov”, etc. in the column “nationality” one can often find Lithuanian, Latvian and others (SA of the city of Astana. F. 1P. Inv. 5, 6, 7). At first sight, such a mishap could be explained by the right of an individual to choose any name. However, since 1940, the NKVD adopted the Instruction “On the order of changing of surnames and names by the USSR citizens” (Instruction NKVD 1940), according to which the reasons and consent of the Soviet bodies were needed to change the names. Therefore, the privilege of determining how Soviet citizens were to be called belonged to the state, which used it quite extensively. Honing in on Soviet citizens the power of its ideological blow, the authorities subjected unsound, in their opinion, surnames to “cross-over”. Thus, Jonas became Ivanov, Sondors became Solovyov, etc.

“The surname was changed because you couldn’t get a job ... because you were unreliable. They pressed so hard that they took my wife’s surname” (Inf. 9). “My mother was born in 1949, she was sent from the orphanage to build a brick factory in Karaganda. Her surname was Lithuanian and she took the surname Shmaralieva to get a job. The children took the surname Shmaraleva. Mother’s surname was I.V.M. Originally from the Merkinė district. We had to raise the archival documents to take Mom’s Lithuanian surname” (Inf. 10).

According to informants, the situation was the same with Estonians: *“There was a choice between assimilation or camps. Estonians tried to survive, ...went through the camps. Some assimilated, adapted to Soviet life..., changed their names. My aunt with the surname Loddi became Grigorieva and was recorded as Russian in her passport” (Inf. 11).* Over time, the “game” with the change of names and surnames led to deplorable results not only in relation to the Baltic diasporas, but also to the representatives of the titular nation.

A characteristic feature of personal names at that time was the presence of many people with two names: one given at birth and recorded in the birth certificate, and the other – Russian, which was not officially recorded anywhere, but was widely used in everyday life. Kazakh Sagyngan became Sasha, German Hans became Gena, Lithuanian Vytautas became Vitaly, etc. The most obvious explanation for the overlapping of the two multilingual systems is the multinational environment with a larger share of the Russian population. The Russian naming “proved” that the “voluntary annexation of the suburbs to Russia” had a progressive influence on the socio-economic development of the republics, and created the preconditions for uniting the traditional cultures of the peoples of the Soviet Union around the “rich culture of the Russian people”. Thus, the traditional system of values, which united language, customs and kinship ties, became a victim of Soviet reforms and an active process of Russification.

We tried to find out from the informants, to what extent the “Balts” used their native language in their

everyday life. Their answers convinced us that in the Baltic environment the native language began to gradually give up its position, giving way to Russian. *“My parents felt ‘different’ when they came to the Kazakh steppe. Of course, we obeyed the laws of this country, but we felt ‘different’. They spoke Lithuanian at home, tried to keep their language, although it was not welcomed”* (Inf. 3). *“People were so intimidated by the repression that ... the bulk of the masses still gathered underground. The fear held for a very long time. They were talking in whispers. Holidays were held clandestinely. (...) All life went on underground. In Soviet times people spoke Estonian at home, in public places in Russian”* (Inf. 1).

The mother tongue of the Baltic peoples became a victim of Soviet policy. The national policy of the Soviet authorities led to the fact that over time the Russian language began to replace the mother tongue, which was used more in the domestic sphere – it was gradually losing its main functions.

In this way, the Soviet political system forcibly imposed a “Soviet” way of life and tried to create its own standard of civic identity under the name “Soviet people”, while obscuring the national and ethnic identities of different peoples with the same colours.

The peoples of the Baltics in Kazakhstan: the destruction of the “laboratory of friendship of peoples”

Today we can talk about the formation of several theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of the problem of developing virgin and fallow lands in Kazakhstan (Naukhatsky, 2018). Russian historiography traditionally recognizes the importance of the social and interethnic components of the reforms of the 1950s–1960s. However, there are still few special studies investigating this problem and, basically, these are dissertations and scientific articles, where regional issues become the subject of research.

The transfer of qualified specialists from the European part of the Soviet Union to the virgin lands was connected not only with the fact that Kazakhstan, despite the industrialization held in the 1920s–1940s, lagged behind other republics in the training of specialists with higher and secondary specialized technical education. “The departmental approach of the union ministries also had an effect, preferring the recruitment of already trained personnel from the central universities of the country to investments in higher technical education in Kazakhstan” (Kaziyeu, 2015). But also, with the fact, as Soviet propaganda broadcast, that the emergence of numerous peoples was one of the all-union channels for creating an “internationalist society”, where the wider population became the main carriers of “generalised inter-ethnic trust”. It is no coincidence that the front pages of the central and regional press published materials that entice people with virgin land romance and propagate ideas about the “common Soviet good”. The archives have preserved a wide range of propaganda narratives addressed to the inhabitants of the Baltic republics. So, the secretary of the Bulaevsky district committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan I. Rybakov, addressing the people of Estonia, wrote: “We have difficulties – there are not enough people. We are confident that the Estonian SSR will render all possible assistance to our region in using the huge reserves that we have in agriculture” (SA of the city of Astana. F. 136. Inv. 7. F. 110. Sh. 35), etc. Therefore, it is no coincidence that among those who came to the virgin lands were also specialists from the Baltic republics, who received housing, wages, and social benefits due to them. Some of these specialists have linked their lives with Kazakhstan forever. For example, in the spring of 1955, the family of M. G. Saltsin, a native of Maišiagala, Vilnius district came. He worked in this village until his retirement as a warehouse manager and buried in 1996 in the village Letovka. His wife Vatslava Stanislavovna worked as a milkmaid, five children studied at a rural school. At the moment, one granddaughter lives in the village (Inf. 14).

The situation and status of ethnic minorities can be compared to square metres in a “communal flat”, where the number of these meters depended on belonging to the titular nation or ethnic minority. And here the faith of N. S. Khrushchev in the imminent creation of a nationless communist state, in which the borders between national republics will be erased did not work. It should be noted that the problems of trust/distrust in interethnic relations really existed in the form of alienation of ethnic minorities, inequality of the status of individual peoples.

Of course, there were “lines of disagreement” due to ethnic hierarchy, but in the everyday life of the virgin land people there were networks of generalised trust that were formed as a result of joint activities. It should

be noted that during the years of the national policy pursued by the Soviet government, it was possible to maintain a “discriminatory balance”.

The channels for drawing up interethnic connecting lines were diverse: these were working relationships, social ties, family unions, and so on. “*Lithuanians had many mixed marriages. We had a lot of people who were married to Poles, Ukrainians*” (Inf. 3). As a woman from Kustanai oblast wrote in her memoirs: “I worked in a threshing floor, unloading wheat. My bosses were good, I ate with them (...). The landlady was German, the owner was Latvian” (Lisakov Regional State Archive. F. 163. Inv. 1. F. 2. Sh. 8). Indeed, mixed marriages among “Balts” were quite common in northern Kazakhstan. Most of the “Balts” joined close kinship ties, most often there were unions: Estonians and Germans, Lithuanians and Ukrainians, etc. Although there were exceptions, they were less common. Ethnic mixed marriages that emerged in the virgin areas served as a kind of confirmation that nationalities communicated not only at work, but also in private life. They were portrayed in the media as “confirmation” of the internationality of Kazakh society.

The non-conflictual relations created, on the whole, optimal conditions for the Baltic peoples who took part in the development of the virgin land and managed to realise their ethnic potential. They included heads of local party organisations, milkmaids, construction workers, mechanics, chauffeurs and others.

At the same time, the practice of the Soviets in importing professional labour inevitably led to competition, where local personnel were often inferior in professional skills to visitors, which sometimes found expression in inter-ethnic and inter-group conflicts. Everyday difficulties in everyday life, as a cognitive dissonance, caused a state of psycho-emotional discomfort and created zones of tension and protest in the republic. In this situation, any minor conflict could escalate into a collective brawl and become a hotbed of mass unrest. The “silence” of the people was only superficial, since any conflict, even on domestic grounds, usually escalates into an ethnic one in a multi-ethnic state.

Scientist V. A. Kozlov, examining mass disturbances in the USSR under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, came to the view that “the main areas of violent ethnic conflicts and clashes in the 1950s were virgin land, novostroika and the North Caucasus. Twenty of the 24 openly ethnically-charged clashes known to us occurred there. Chechens and Ingush were the most active in violent conflicts, second only to Russians” (Kozlov, 2009). Many illegal incidents by Chechens and Ingush were often not recorded by the police, as collective farm managers and villagers were “afraid of possible retaliation from them”.

It is difficult to disagree with the scientist’s conclusions. According to information from the authorities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kazakh SSR, relations between the special settlers of the North Caucasus and virgin land workers were strained and often escalated into direct clashes and fights. The judicial authorities of the Kokchetav Oblast had registered 323 cases in 1954. 323 cases of hooliganism, more than half of which fell at the end of the year. “Thus, on 25 July in the canteen of the village. Takhtobrod, Aryk-Balyk district, caused a brawl between special settlers: Bekov Bayan, Khomhoev Khamzat, Ozdoev Magomet on one side with workers of the state farm: Telignos D., Ocheratyan Nikolay and others, on the other side”.

On December 12, 1954 there was a large fight at Azet station, Kokchetav district, in the village canteen. Z. Alkhazov, born in 1928. Z. Alkhazov (b. 1928), B. Alkhazov (b. 1925) and M. Yershikhanov (b. 1932). (b. 1932) – beat up Belyakov N., who had come to develop virgin lands, and stabbed a driver of a grain farm “Razdolnyy”, Kokchetav district, Blinnikov V., who happened to come into the canteen during a fight” (Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (AP RK). F. 812. Inv. 19. F. 349. Sh. 2).

The fights between special settlers and virgin land workers took on a mass character, “each time 10–25 people took part in them” (AP RK. F. 708. Inv. 28. F. 1339a. Sh. 15–16). The police were limited to fixing instances of hooliganism and did not actually contribute to the prevention of these abnormal phenomena.

So, the head of the department of the State Security Committee under the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh SSR in the Akmola Oblast, lieutenant colonel Harkin reported in 1957 to the secretary of the Akmola Oblast committee of the CPK G. A. Melnik, that 50 people of the adult population of Lithuanian

nationality and about the same number of Ingush lived in the coal mine of the Zholymbet mine. Recently, enmity had arisen between them and persons of Ingush nationality were persecuting Lithuanians. “Thus, for example: on July 10, 1957, the Ingush people Ozdoev, Parchiev, Osmiyev, and others, only 6 people, entered the store in the village of Coal, while Lithuanians Egelyavichus and Lenkevichus were in the store. Ozdoev, seeing the indicated Lithuanians, went up to Egelyavichus and said to him: ‘Why did you put my brother in prison’, and hit him in the face with his hand. Yegelyavichus retaliated against Ozdoev. At this time, the remaining 5 Ingush people attacked Egelyavichus and beat him up”. The secret note noted problems in relations between these peoples, which were so tense that “according to the witness Urbanovichus, the Ingush people gathered on July 11 in Ozdoev’s apartment, where firearms were allegedly taken down” (SAAO. F. 1. Inv. 1. F. 2542. Sh. 104).

We should add that after the 1953 amnesty, some prisoners of the camps, numerous special settlers and deported peoples remained in these places. Migration processes connected with the virgin land campaign caused tensions connected primarily, as mentioned above, with problems of a domestic nature (lack of drinking water, housing and other infrastructure). The romance of the virgin land and the irritation of the domestic situation sometimes erupted in inter-group conflicts, when the aggression of the masses was directed at representatives of law and order. “The most common form of inter-group conflict resolution in areas of Kazakhstan and Siberia (as well as other newly-built territories) was collective fighting” (Kozlov, 2009).

In a special report of the executive committee of the Akmola Oblast Council it was noted that on 13 October 1957 in the Atbasar School No. 59 of the Ministry of Agriculture a hooliganism by cadets took place, expressed in the beating of masters of industrial training and officers of the Atbasar district police department. Police Major Pilipas and his colleagues were attacked by the rampaging crowd with the words: “Hooray! POLANDRA! The Beriyevs are here, beat them!” The hooligans attacked the policemen, as a result of which Pilipas was hit on the head with a heavy object?” (SAAO. F. 1. Inv. 1. F. 2542. Sh. 156, 160).

At present, we can state that documents relating to inter-ethnic conflicts, in which representatives of the Baltic peoples were involved, are rare. At any rate, we have not found any in the declassified archives. This is due to the fact that despite hardships and deprivations, the Baltic diasporas were able to demonstrate a high level of adaptability to the harsh conditions of the Kazakh steppes, non-conflict and respect for the culture of the peoples living in Kazakhstan. “Estonians felt at home in Kazakhstan. Many of them even spoke Kazakh. They knew the traditions, history and culture of the people of Kazakhstan” (Inf. 12).

Our informants’ reports about the joint Soviet space of locals and newcomers is generally in line with our assumptions. We purposely asked the “Balts” questions about interethnic relations, but they all rejected the existence of conflicts when communicating with both Kazakhs and migrants. In the words of one of them: “Relations have never been built on the basis of nationality. If a person was worthy, we were friends with him. Only mutual understanding. In Kazakhstan there are many different peoples, each with their own resettlement history. There were deportations, evacuations during the war, and virgin lands. In my memory and from the stories of my parents and grandmother I remember only an honest attitude to a person as a person” (Inf. 4).

Let us quote another informant: “I do not remember ethnic conflicts. We had a house book and there were many different surnames in it. I asked my grandmother Elizaveta who these people were, our house was like a dormitory. She said people were coming to get jobs, they needed registration. And we registered them. The conflicts were more on domestic grounds. Different nationalities came, different cultures, some like salo, some don’t” (Inf. 3).

The virgin land workers who left for their historic homeland recall their time in Kazakhstan as follows: “In the Shamalgan school, education and upbringing were conducted in the spirit of international friendship. Children of repressed nations – Chechens, Meskhetians, Germans – studied in our class. But we children had no concept of Stalinist repression: everyone was equal and everyone was respected and friendly. In addition, Balkars, Uighurs, Ukrainians, Koreans, Russians and children of other nationalities studied in our class. There were evenings at school to get acquainted with the culture and traditions of one or another nation of the USSR. There was friendship and there were no conflicts” (Inf. 12).

Similar non-conflictual relations were formed between the “Balts” and other peoples not only in

Kazakhstan. According to V. P. Kliueva and R. Čepaitienė who examined the memory of the participation of Lithuanian labour migrants (road builders and construction workers) in the development of the West Siberian oil and gas complex in the 1980s and mid 1990s, “contacts with other Baltic specialists or locals (...) are of positive, non-conflict nature” (Kliueva & Čepaitienė, 2019).

We note that the informants not only used the connotations “mutual understanding”, “friendship”, but also tried to explain the reason for the non-conflict nature of the Baltic diasporas: *“Estonians kept to villages, they were friends with Germans. We Estonians could not stand up for ourselves like the Chechens. We could have been shot. There were no ethnic conflicts. The Estonians were a peace-loving people. We were few in number and this did not allow us to organise ourselves into groups. We had to behave quietly, inconspicuously – keep a low profile”* (Inf. 1).

Other informants had the same idea. *“We lived scattered lives. The Soviet authorities ‘tried’ to scatter us in the vast expanses of Kazakhstan”* (Inf. 3). Here is a small excerpt from the interview of Piiksaar Helmi Grigori tütar, a woman born in 1935 in Tallinn, which shows the attitude of most of the “Balts” to the issue of interethnic relations: *“Due to our small number, relations between the other peoples were not complicated in any way. I used to work in a hospital. There were no conflicts”* (Inf. 13).



Figure 1. Piiksaar Helmi Grigori tütar. First on the left in the bottom row.

Figure from Piiksaar’s personal archive

From the positive narratives describing interethnic relations among locals and immigrants, memories-experiences of childhood, school years, related to the topic of relations with peers, stand out. *“As a child I was called a Lithuanian fascist. In my school where I studied there were few Lithuanians. I was called so. Where did it all come from? From my parents. They told their children that they were Lithuanian ‘forest brothers’. They killed our people during the war. Take the descendants of the UPA, they were called Banderites. This is the kind of thing that was going on”* (Inf. 8).

Other informants also relayed similar memories: *“They used to call me Losharik at school. The language was destroyed... They laughed at the Estonian pronunciation. We were treated as second-rate. Because the language, the culture is different. There were only two Estonians in our school. We were friends with the Germans. We are Lutherans, they are Catholics. Schneider was my friend, we studied together, he was called a fascist, and we were called that too. His father made me learn Estonian. His father Otto said: ‘You are Estonian, you should know your own language’”* (Inf. 9).

Children’s memories were to some extent a reflection of reality, so they illustrated “hidden” interethnic relations in a natural way and with a childlike directness. To be fair, it is worth noting that in Soviet society, children assigned nicknames (sometimes pejorative ones) to other nations as well. For example, Kazakhs were called “kalbit” (ignorant, uncultured), “mambet” (from the countryside); Germans – “Fritz”, “fascist”; Koreans – “dog-eater”; representatives of Caucasian peoples – “Khachik”, Russians – “rusish schweine” (Russian pig), “ak kulak” (meaning pig ear), etc. They also widely used nicknames depending on nationality in everyday communication (Raudvere, 2020). However, it was not only the Baltic peoples who were treated as “second-rate”. In the memoirs of the student Kurs Ott we read the following: “When I first reached Kazakhstan in 1962, we had a conversation with a Russian on the train who loudly swore at Kazakhs, calling them dogs. This conversation was disgusting” (Kurs, 2019).

In addition to the above, there were those who had a grudge against the authorities – for the unjust

sentences of Stalin's time, for the broken fates during the deportations, for all that the system had promised but failed to deliver. The indifference of the authorities created anti-Soviet sentiments in society, disbelief in the "triumph of communism", mistrust in the authorities as the guarantor of life and legal rights.

In the party funds of the archive of Kokchetav there are materials in which the Department of the State Security Committee under the Ministry of Justice of the USSR on the Karaganda railway established facts indicating that among the workers of railway transport there were persons who "do not believe the decision of the Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU, due to the fact that, using only press reports, they do not know the details of the events that took place at the Plenum" (SAAO. F. 1. Inv. 1. F. 2542. Sh. 99). Moreover, individuals who held responsible government positions interpreted the decision of the June 1957 Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU from a hostile position. Thus, the deputy chairman of the *dorprofsozhd* (Road committee of the trade union of railway transport workers) of the builders of Yuzhsib, Toropeev, in a conversation with the head of the personnel department of *Stroy ORS* (Department of Work Supply) Borisov, asked the latter: "Here I am, as a young man, do not understand why Molotov, the one who back in 1912 published the first issue of the newspaper Pravda, the one who led the party organization of Leningrad, the one who prepared the October Revolution in Lenin's absence, could now become the head of the anti-party group. I don't think I get it". Let us quote Borisov's answer in full, because, judging by the document, he expressed the opinion of a considerable number of people: "Who knows who of them is right and who is wrong. Maybe, Molotov, Malenkov, and Kaganovich should not have spoken out sharply against Comrade Khrushchev, and not everyone likes criticism. Malenkov at the address of Comrade Khrushchev said that Comrade Khrushchev could not be the first secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU; at best, he would be a good minister of agriculture. This definition was supported by Molotov, after which, of course, Comrade Khrushchev didn't like it. That is the reason why he is furious now, now you understand?" (ibid.).

The head of the railway communications service, Zenkis, agreed that "such a fact of organizing an anti-party group is unpleasant, what could be the reason for the mutual unfriendliness between the members of the Presidium" (ibid.). And if some, not trusting the official reports of the authorities, looked for answers in private conversations, then others listened to the broadcasts of the Voice of America radio station, expressed their convictions by decision of the June Plenum of the Central Committee of the CPSU. Let us quote the words of Frolov, a minder of the tuberculosis railway hospital: "...the people do not believe what the communists say. They have already lied; you will not understand anything at all. The Americans correctly say that when Stalin died, the beast was gone, but the lair remained, this is the same cult of personality" (ibid.).

The "virgin land anti-Sovietism" among the Baltic diasporas was not a common phenomenon for various reasons. First, as the respondents noted, diasporas tried "not to talk much" and for the sake of their safety did not bring anti-Soviet sentiments within the family into the public space (there is no doubt that they were, at least based on the words of our informant "the Soviet authorities 'did their best'"). Secondly, as V. A. Kozlov observed: "...paradoxically, the pragmatic cynicism and degradation of the 'communist dream' (...) created far fewer opportunities for urban philistines to become involved in the turmoil. They adapted to power and its injustices, knew the real price of its myths, and were absolutely not going to risk themselves for the legend of 'real communism'" (Kozlov, 2009).

Thus, during the years of development of the virgin lands, Baltic "virgin lands workers" also came to Kazakhstan, along with others. Over time, the 1979 census recorded an outflow of population to the Baltics. Informants named different reasons for departure: "hidden" discrimination, difficult material and living conditions, alien language environment, nostalgia and others.

Those who stayed in Kazakhstan explain their choice as follows: "*When return programmes to the historical homeland were created, we could afford to leave. But some died in the camps. A large part lost contact with close relatives for fear of affecting relatives during the repressions. Therefore, some of us did not want to return to our homeland, here we were formed, put down roots. When we were offered to go to our homeland, Lithuanians asked 'who to go to, if just to visit, to see where our ancestors lived'. But we went back to Kazakhstan*" (Inf. 3).

The remaining “Balts” Kazakhstanis have settled into the local socio-cultural environment, while at the same time trying not to forget their ethnic identity. They have created historical and cultural institutions: memorial complexes, centres, cultural associations, unions (for example, “Estonian Cultural Centre of Kazakhstan” association in Almaty, “Lithuanian Community of Karaganda”, “Belarusian-Baltic Association” in Kostanai and others).

“So that the spirit does not go out...”

The issue of developing national cultures has never been a priority in Soviet national policy. Moreover, in the 1950s, Russification began to noticeably make its way into national politics. By that time, the planting of the “Soviet image” and “Soviet values” was the main ideological task of the authorities. To solve it, various national mechanisms were used, including the creation of the appearance of satisfying the “cultural hunger” of the Baltic diasporas. So, in the midst of harvesting work, a team of artists from the State Philharmonic of the Lithuanian SSR arrived in North Kazakhstan Oblast (SA of the city of Astana. F. 136. Inv. 7. F. 109. Sh. 11). The teams of the State Philharmonic Society of the ESSR, as well as the Sailor Club of the Baltic Fleet, the laureate of the Estonian Republican Festival, also traveled through the virgin land steppes with interesting concert programs (SA of the city of Astana. F. 136. Inv. 7. F. 110. Sh. 12).

In our opinion, the regular “cultural trains” organized by the authorities, which ran through the steppe expanses of Kazakhstan, were not so much aimed at helping peoples maintain contact with their historical homeland, avoid assimilation and satisfy their ethnic and social needs, but indirectly influenced the decrease in the degree of tension among the peoples located in a “foreign” environment. It is not for nothing that the archival files contain numerous material that “the program was worked out and varied, therefore (listeners) violently demanded the repetition of many Estonian songs and folk dances” (ibid.).



Figure 2. Lithuanian ensemble of amateur performances. 1955

From the personal archive inf. 3.

Although, of course, this was not enough. *“In Soviet times, we lacked the fact that the Estonian spirit did not go out. There were no cultural centres. The whole culture developed in spite of the system”* (Inf. 1). The pressure of a different ethnic environment invariably united the Baltic diasporas. “Contrary to the system”, the “Balts” tried to preserve the culture of their ancestors, connection with the “territory of exodus” and this was expressed, in particular, in the construction of “Balts” houses. Each house had its own face: Lithuanians had houses that had distinctive colour features depending on the place of birth, Estonians had houses with a front garden and a large household (“cow, sheep, pigs, poultry, rabbits”), Latvians had a house with a gable thatched roof.

Feeling like “others” in Kazakhstan, the Lithuanians built up the territory according to their taste and traditions, creating the Baltic/European way of life and the “speciality” of their culture. The civilization of the “Balts” is present in the narratives of the Kazakh virgin lands: *“Several families of Lithuanians came to our state farm. My mother had a Lithuanian neighbour. Her name was Anelia. The Lithuanians’ houses were very different from*

ours, the Kazakh ones. To my mother's question: 'Why do they have colourful houses?' Anelia answered: 'In our homeland, our houses are always buried in greenery. We practically do not have fences, we are very different from other nations in this, because it is desirable not to make fences here, we make them from hedges, they are all trimmed. Lithuanians plant mostly gardens and lawns near them. There are unwritten laws between neighbours – who has a more beautiful, cleaner house and plot. Our houses are distinguished by colours'".

At the end of the conversation, the informant added: "The Baltic peoples are different" (Inf. 7.) A noteworthy point in this passage is that the term "Balts" was used not only for the purpose of ascertaining differences, but also for the purpose of evaluating the "other". Having moved to Kazakhstan, they were able, despite difficult relations with local and other peoples, to create strong farms. For this reason, this concept, without any doubt, is an evaluation category that is filled with positive content. The "Balts" describe their houses not only as "flowery", but even as something fabulous: "Grandma had a front garden with flowers in front of the house. And the well – at that time the only one at all. There was a garden behind the house. And then – beautiful garden squares – vegetables, herbs, potatoes, corn, sorghum (brooms were made from it). And everywhere between them were stripes of flowers. Grandmother's house resembled a fairy tale with its ideal order" (Inf. 4).

You can perceive the "fabulousness" of a house in different ways: as a touching memory from childhood and therefore unforgettable, and at the same time as a "different" house (front garden, flowers, different colours) in the steppe "monochrome" Kazakhstan, i.e. "another" world. "The Baltic states were perceived in Kazakhstan as a kind of internal foreign country. If we felt different, then only a little more European" (Inf. 4).

Such an attitude of the Baltic diasporas to the environment was associated not only with a different level of ecological culture, in which special attention was paid to natural aesthetics. Here, it is most likely appropriate to talk about the need of the people to keep in memory the markers of their material culture, which, in the conditions of being among the "other" culture, preserved and strengthened the national identity, "so that the spirit does not go out".



Figure 3. Lithuanian house.

Figure from personal archive inf. 2.

Holidays, rituals and ceremonies, the daily life of the Baltic peoples was unthinkable without traditional cuisine. They seemed to them primordially folk, inseparable from their way of life. Here is how V. Tvarionas describes his childhood: "There were few of us, Lithuanians, but we got together, celebrated Christmas holidays, this is the most important holiday, then the summer holiday of Ioninis, then in the month of July – the day of King Mindaugas. These are the main holidays that were celebrated, despite the prohibitions, even in Soviet times. My parents shared dishes: cepelinai, kugelis is a potato with meat, šakotis is a national cake, donna is bread. Mom often made girras – a drink like kvass" (Inf. 3).

According to one of our interlocutors, family meals were an important part of everyday life. They not only prepared traditional dishes, discussed family issues, but also sounded warning words to the younger generation: "Mom cooked mūlgikap, a kind of pilaf, only Estonian. My father used to say that the know-how, kama, belongs to Estonians. These are boiled cereals (oats, barley, rye) in winter, ground into flour, then in summer, when there is suffering, when it was necessary to go out into the field, ...when every minute is precious, Estonians took kama, diluted it with milk or yogurt and got high-calorie food. ...The only thing my parents always said was don't talk too much!" (Inf. 1).

It is worth noting the active religious activities of the German population during the Khrushchev decade (Saktaganova, 2018; Mazhitova, 2022). The religious ritual and ceremonial life of the Baltic peoples was relatively rich.

Despite official prohibitions, traditional family and religious holidays and ceremonies were preserved: baptism (“*I was baptized at 3 months in a church*” Inf. 8), Christmas, pagan holidays (“*Lithuanians remained pagans for a long time. We were the last ones in Europe to be baptized. Therefore, many rituals were associated with paganism. Even our cross is associated with paganism*” Inf. 3). The traditional ritual, judging by the stories of the informants, did not undergo significant changes in the 1950s–1960s, did not “overgrown” with new elements, although it cannot be ruled out that, over time, the process of sovietisation also embraced the components of traditional everyday culture, transforming it into a minimalist form.

Conclusion

The authors’ attempt to analyse the issues of “standards and deviations” in the everyday life of the Baltic citizens who arrived in the virgin lands has shown that these concepts served as a marker of Soviet reality and were the result of the party bodies’ policy of creating the Soviet state. The Soviet authorities, having proclaimed a course for the ploughing of land masses in Kazakhstan, imperatively implemented the “standards” of contribution and “behavior” of the Union republics in the implementation of this project.

The “standards/deviations” that existed in everyday life evoke conflicting emotions among the Baltic diasporas, due to the difficulty of assessing them. The fact that the land of Kazakhstan is largely associated with a place of trauma during the occupation and deportation of the Baltic diasporas plays a role here. In addition, while for some “Balts” life in virgin land Kazakhstan was a launching pad for their own plans and ambitions, for others it was a severed link to the “land of exodus”, a time of loss of national identity caused by the chaos of Soviet political and socio-economic reforms.

It is interesting that, on the one hand, prolonged stay among the “other” culture was rallying the Baltic diasporas, pushing them to preserve “non-standard” national identity markers (language, culture, etc.) in the context of purposeful Sovietization and russification of Kazakhstani society. On the other hand, at the same time, we observe their search for “standard” ways of survival for the Soviet reality – service of special settlers in state bodies, “acceptance” of Soviet community norms, Russian naming, mixed marriages and other everyday practices.

The “standards” formed the general features of “Sovietness” as a “norm” of everyday life. As in any other society, “deviations” in the form of protests, inter-ethnic conflicts and discontent over a wide range of issues – ethnic minority status, language position and role, material and domestic issues, dissatisfaction with the authorities, etc. – were a kind of archetype, allowing “pre-modern” ethnic needs to be met and national identity to be preserved.

Acknowledgment: The article was prepared as part of the implementation of the IRN AP23488158 project “Northern Kazakhstan’s population’s polyethnic composition history and the process of nation-building (19th – 20th centuries)” (grant funding from Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan) for 2024–2026.

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- SAAO. State Archive of Akmola Oblast, Kokshetau, Kazakhstan.
- SA of the city of Astana. State archive of the city of Astana, Astana, Kazakhsn.
- SAKO. State Archive of Kostanai Oblast, Kostanai, Kazakhstan.

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List of abbreviations

- F. – Fund
- I. – Inventory
- F. – File
- Sh. – Sheet