Not Only in the Steppes: Building an Urban Proletariat

A lecturer addresses the achievements of the Five Year Plan:
In city X a power plant has been built!
A voice from the audience:
I was in this city, and there isn’t any power plant!
The lecturer continues:
In city Y a huge new factory has been constructed!
The same voice:
I was there a week ago, and there isn’t any factory!
The lecturer loses his patience:
Comrade! Instead of running around for nothing, I would recommend that you will stay at home and invest your time in reading newspapers!

(a 1930s Soviet joke)

As already mentioned, before the Revolution, most of the Jews in Central Asia were city dwellers, and thus their livelihoods were tied to the urban economic structure, whether in commerce or in small-time craftsmanship. Parallel to the state sponsored effort to settle Jews on land there were other agencies which were responsible to integrate indigenous populations in the cities. From 1928 to 1938, the government focused its operations on realizing integration (korennezatsia) of native populations in the regime’s local administrative machinery, and establishment of frameworks for training skilled workers and manufacturing artels – amalgamating small-time craftsperson into cooperatives. In 1926, Faizulla Khojaev again ratified the position that Bukharan Jews were a native national entity, and therefore he approved their rights to equal status parallel to other national populations in Uzbekistan – groups that enjoyed preferential status compared to European nationals who lived in the republic (including Ashkenazi Jews). In practice, there were many cases where local government clerks found it difficult or didn’t take the trouble to
differentiate between Jews of Ashkenazi and Bukharan origin, and didn’t make an effort to integrate Bukharan Jews in places of employment in the framework of the korenezatsiia.¹

The regime didn’t carry out surveys of general unemployment, and the scope of Jewish unemployment wasn’t clear at all, nor could one determine whether it differed significantly from unemployment levels among other nationalities in Central Asia. Even if the korenezatsiia had been implemented in full, it could not have solved the Jewish employment problem for three reasons: In the framework of the korenezatsiia, members of native populations were integrated according to their relative weight within the overall population; since the Bukharan Jews were only half a percent of the population-at-large (although in the big cities they constituted ten percent of the population), the impact would have been marginal. Secondly, one of the characteristics of the korenezatsiia was tied to changes in the official language – from use of Russian in official communication, to the tongue of the titular nationality. In Uzbekistan, Uzbek was the official local language, and the Bukharan Jewish population didn’t necessarily possess mastery of this language. The third reason was that in Uzbekistan (and most probably in other places, as well) the korenezatsiia process was never really implemented in full, beyond the declarative level. In many cases, native employees were fired after they were hired in the framework of the korenezatsiia, while Russian or European clerks were hired due to their skills. At the end of 1928, out of approximately two thousand administrative personnel in the Communist party in Uzbekistan, there were only 120 employee representing native nationalities (in that year Uzbeks reached, for the first time, a majority among Communist party members). Due to lack of internalization as well as lack of coordination in the korenezatsiia process, it seems that clerks in labor exchanges primarily referred “Russian” workers to skilled positions, while the percent of native national populations referred to work was only 13.5 percent of the total.²

On the other hand, ethnic-Russian government employee and party members complained of discrimination against them in steps towards forced

¹ Literally, ‘rooting’: a term coined for the Soviet policy of integrating representatives of local nationalities within governmental and party frameworks. See comment on this issue made by the secretary of the Minorities Committee of Tashkent region, June 1929: UZRMDA-R-86-1-5266-205; Same in Kalendarov’s report on Samarkand: UZRMDA-R-86-1-3659-226; And same on May, 1929 in Namangan, see: UZRMDA-R-227-1-57-37.
² Clerks appointed only 593 workers who were native nationalities, this from 4,381 appointments, see: ‘V riadakh Partii’, PV, 242 (20-10-1928) (Within the Party echelons).