ANTI-JEWISH POGROMS IN EASTERN SIBERIA: THE POSSIBILITY OF IMPOSSIBLE

According to objective reality in Siberia there were no conditions for anti-Semitism. Being actually colonial borderlands of Tsarist Russia, it sharply needed bearers of capitalist mind, such were Jews and nobody could compete with them in this respect. Besides, Jews were rather small ethnic group. Amounting to less than 1 percent of Siberian population they acted promptly in searching vacant fields in regional economics and held them without any irritation on the part of the local population. People of this vigorously developing region got accustomed to adherents of different religions and treated them friendly. And, at last, Siberian Jews who found themselves in alien religious and language environment quickly adapted themselves to strange culture and according to Gabriella Safran displayed their ability to think and look just like representatives of the leading nation.2

If we take into account the statement of Benjamin Natans that the discrimination of Jews was the result of the archaic style regime and the devotion of Jews to traditional way of the life,3 we should admit the second component was lacking in Siberia. Nevertheless, the beginning of the twentieth century was marked with increasing pogrom waves: in 1905 there were pogroms in Irkutsk and Tomsk; in 1916-1917 riots took place in Krasnoiarsk, Bogotol, Biysk, Novonikolaevsk, Barnaul, some villages of Tomsk and Enisei regions.4

Too great would be temptation for a researcher to explain these events by spirits brought from the Pale of Settlement. Indeed, activities of the Siberian Administration as the part of the state machine were only continuation of Russian policy, and high-ranking officials from S. Petersburg who were not aware of local peculiarities eventually became bearers of official ideology. Besides, exiled and migrants brought and preserved anti-Semitism as the sign of their own identity. Some researches think that anti-Jewish stereotypes remained mainly due to the fact that the Siberian society in spite of specific features was a part of the Empire.5 But it would be simplification and couldn’t explain the main thing: why anti-Semitism as “an indicator” of public mood did not always act. In the 80-s of the nineteenth century pogrom spirits brought from the Pale of Settlement to Siberia

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did not develop into open violence. In Irkutsk the Orthodox Church took the hard attitude in connection with the wave of xenophobia which swept over Russia and was able to explain to the followers all the absurdity, sin and inhumanity of pogroms. It's worth stating that anti-Jewish spirits weakened from the West to the East. Pogrom wave did not reach the region to the East of Baikal, in 1905 no pogroms took place there. Representatives of Siberian Administration being totally infected with anti-Semitism realized that it was just impossible to transfer their own spirits on Siberia at once. Siberian population was not ready to treat Jews or any other nations in such a way and it would take much time to accustom Siberian people to it. More than that, contemporaries stated that Siberia was one of the most democratic regions of Russia, its people did not worship high-ranking officials as it used to be in Western parts of the country.

The reason of possibility of the impossible was prompted by scenario of pogrom actions. In anti-Jewish pogroms in Irkutsk (1905) and in Krasnoiarsk (1916) from the very beginning the Jewish motive was not evident. They began as the riots against the Power, as the form of public discontent against social instability; in Irkutsk its background was All-Russia Railway strike, in Krasnoiarsk – these were hunger, high prices, fall in living standards caused by the First World War. But in both cases the authorities succeeded in directing public discontent into Jewish course. The social basis of people who usually participated in pogroms is clear: petty proprietors, peasants, craftsmen, as a rule not very successful, so we may speak about pogroms at the method of elimination of brilliant economic rivals. Economic background of pogroms could be proved by the fact that beatings and slaughter did not assume mass form (in Irkutsk during general riots ten people were killed and twenty wounded, not only Jews but also Russians got involved in the fight). As usual after the devastation of Jewish shops came the turn of Russian ones. But Jewish shops suffered more and it gave possibility to speak about Jewish color of riots. In times of relative stability representatives of different ethnic groups made a compromise and social strata which gave birth to pogromers confined themselves to judgments about eviction of Jews and other non-Russians (such facts took place in Verkneudinsk and Barguzin) or public boycott to them (Irkutsk, Krasnoiarsk), but in trouble times pogrom spirits broke away and discontent with successful rivals assumed barbarian, ugly forms. Pogroms were means of public relaxation, display of discontent of unsolved social problems and as it often happened in Russia all these factors took the form of riots, ruthless and cruel.

The question “who is guilty?” is always on the agenda in such cases. Jews were the first to become scapegoats. During the First World War soldiers returning

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8. L. V. Kalmina, Evreiskie obschchny Vostochnoi Sibiri (seredina XIX v.-fevral 1917 goda) (Ulan-Ude: IPK VSGAKI, 2003), pp. 166, 168. It was significant that not a single sentence had been executed. Most citizens were strongly against eviction of Jews and condemned boycotting them. Representatives of big merchants and in some cases low-ranking policemen insisted on retaining Jews in above-mentioned towns, as they contributed to their economic development.