

Maare Paloheimo – Research Project

Shared Economic Spaces of Finnish towns - The Emergence and Assimilation of Russian-born Merchants in Finland, 1809-1917

The research project Shared Economic Spaces of Finnish towns - The Emergence and Assimilation of Russian-born Merchants in Finland, 1809-1917 draws together the research themes of economic and business history, immigration studies as well as the study of religion and culture. The research focuses on outside influences on Finnish society and economic life by examining Russian-born individuals engaging in business activities in Finland from 1809 to 1917. After 1809 the number of the Russian-born individuals as well as Russian influence increased markedly in Finland, as the territory that approximately constitutes modern Finland was ceded from Sweden to Russia after the war of 1808-1809 and became the Grand Duchy of Finland, an autonomous entity within the Russian Empire. The immigrant Russian population and their descendants remained in Finland after 1917, when the country gained independence. This project investigates three research themes related to the emergence of Russians in Finland: 1) the shifts in policy towards the Russian minority and their rights to engage in economic activity between 1809 and 1917, 2) merchants' religious affiliations and attitudes towards the newcomers representing the Orthodox faith and, finally, 3) the assimilation of Russian merchant families into Finnish society.

The theoretical framework of the research builds on discussions on ethnic entrepreneurship, representations of economic nationalism, borderland studies as well as immigration. The research will provide new insights into the development of the business-government relationship in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contribute to our understanding of the gradual process of diversification and internationalization of business life as well as the cultural and social impact of immigrant business actors in a border country.

The research is motivated by the fact that the consequences of the emergence of Russian immigrants were very noticeable in Finnish towns after 1809. For example a significant change was the establishment of new Eastern Orthodox churches and parishes. The change was seen also in economic and business life as it faced

increasing diversification in terms of ethnicity and religious affiliations from 1809 onwards.¹ Although Russians soon became the largest ethnic and religious minority in Finland, it is difficult to form a coherent picture of early immigration owing to the fragmented and incoherent scraps of information contained in the archival sources. The availability of statistical information improves from the mid-19th onwards. By the early 1920s, in the turmoil of the civil war in Russia, there were some 25,000 individuals of foreign origin in Finland who had once been subjects of the Russian Tsar. Most of them were refugees and thus not covered by this research.

The transformation occurring in Finnish economic and business life concurrently with the emergence of Russian business actors has generally attracted less scholarly attention. The existing body of research has highlighted the role of western influences in Finnish economic and business history: whereas a shared history with Sweden and established business relationships with certain areas of Continental Europe, particularly with the cities in the territory of modern-day Germany, have aroused special interest among scholars, the eastern, that is Russian, influences in the Finnish economy have attracted less attention. The present research aims to provide new insights into this 1 The majority of those who came from Russia to Finland were Eastern Orthodox, but there were also Jews and Tatars. Here the focus will be on the first mentioned group. research area and thus, the first research theme mentioned above will examine the development of legislation dealing especially with entrepreneurs of Russian origin and immigrant entrepreneurship in general in Finland from 1809 to 1917. By studying this theme the research will contribute to the discussion on the continuities and discontinuities in administrative and political history and also enhance our understanding of the economic environment in which ethnic entrepreneurship has developed in Finland. The objective is to examine changes in the institutional framework and the rights of non-native individuals to engage in a profession (e.g. commerce and industry) and societal activities in Finland.

Furthermore, attention will be paid to the differences between the economic legislation in the Grand Duchy of Finland and imperial Russia. This research objective is important since the Swedish law which was retained in Finland after 1809 stipulated the economic

¹ The majority of those who came from Russia to Finland were Eastern Orthodox, but there were also Jews and Tatars. Here the focus will be on the first mentioned group.

privileges and right to engage in a profession not only according to ethnic origin but also gender and religious conviction. These factors also determined an individual's place in society until the early 20th century. By contrast, the Russian law enshrined freedom of entrepreneurship and allowed both genders and various social groups (including serfs) to engage in commerce and industry. The different systems of ensuring property rights caused problematic situations in several Finnish towns after 1809 as the Russian newcomers were not familiar with the local institutional framework.

The second research theme studies relationship between the native, mainly Swedish speaking, merchant community and Russian origin newcomers of which the main religion was Eastern Orthodoxy. It is already documented that the relationship was characterized by certain difficulties originating not only from language problems but also religious conventions and regulations, among others the way how Lutheran and Orthodox religious holidays influenced the opening hours of shops. Differences could be found also in business customs, the selection of the goods in shops and merchants' outward appearances. Indeed, the issues related to the religious convictions were important especially in the context of nineteenth century Finland and Russia. The fact that the Russian Tsar allowed the Lutheran Church to retain its hegemonic status in the Grand Duchy of Finland, although the main religion in the Empire was Eastern Orthodoxy, caused also practical problems to the members of the Russian Orthodox Church living in Finland. Namely, they were precluded by reason of their religion from holding office in the public sector in Finland until 1827. This restricted their opportunities to participate in collective decision-making (including economic issues) at the local level and their opportunities to have a voice in society. The situation was unique: the Baltic provinces under Russian rule in the nineteenth century came to face the altered religious policy, including abrogating the autonomous character of the provincial churches. In Finland, the rights of various religious groups were relaxed in 1923 when the Act on the Freedom of Religion was passed. The afore-mentioned situation is studied through case studies which allow us a more detailed look at conflicts between the Eastern Orthodox merchants and Lutheran merchants in the city of Helsinki and two smaller cities.

The third research theme concerns assimilation of Russian merchant families into Finnish society and it will study culture and values of individuals of Russian origin active in Finnish economic and business life during the research period. The existing research has demonstrated that Russian culture has many special characteristics, e.g. values emphasizing the role of family and kinship as well as the importance of religion and philanthropy in everyday life. The studies on Russians in Finland consider the aforementioned characteristics as typical to the members of Eastern Orthodox Church in the nineteenth century. It is documented that especially philanthropy and active participation in parochial tasks were highly valued among the wealthy Russian-born merchants settled in Finnish towns. Thus, it is assumed that homogeneity, which was based on Russian business actors' common ethnicity, language, religion, cultural values, and shared experiences, made their communities and networks tighter and increased mutual trust. The research aims to examine whether these factors improved Russian business actors' opportunities to gain a foothold in economic and business life in Finland after 1809. Similarly, I shall evaluate if these factors, once so fortuitous, turned against the Russian business community in times of mounting political tension and the surge of Finnish nationalism around the turn of the new century. In addition, here the aim is to further the understanding of the assimilation strategies of Russian origin individuals in Finnish society. Information from earlier studies on this topic is scarce and mainly the assimilation of the most successful business families is known as they integrated into the Lutheran, Swedish speaking elite. The majority of Russians with no such inclination to adapt to the prevailing social milieu but preserved their indigenous culture, has received less attention in the existing body of literature.

The research relies on a wide variety of research materials and sources to investigate, analyze and answer the questions related to the main themes presented above. The research data will be collected from various public archives and libraries in Finland and numerous published documents and statistical sources will be analyzed. The most important archive is the National Archives of Finland, which preserves the archives of the Finnish Senate, archives of the Governor General and the Minister Secretary of State. In addition, the material preserved by Finnish provincial archives (e.g. the documents of local authorities, town administrative courts and parish archives) are

employed. Further qualitative evidence can be gleaned from various online collections and secondary sources such as newspapers published in Finland before 1910 (<http://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/index.html?language=en>).

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